

SKYE WILSON ROXIE RAY

LUCIFER'S
FATE

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MARRIED TO THE DEVIL: BOOK 3

ROXIE RAY
SKYE WILSON

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FOREWORD

*“Salimmo sù, el primo e io secondo,
Tanto ch'i' vidi de le cose belle
Che porta 'l ciel, per un pertugio tondo.
E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.”*

—Dante Alighieri
Canto XXXIV, Inferno, “The Divine Comedy”

PROLOGUE

LUKE

This is it, darling girl.

This is where our great love story finally comes to an end.

For thousands of years, I've loved you. Ever since I fell from Heaven, right into your grace. Our love is only slightly younger than the creation of the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea; only marginally older than the invention of sex and sin.

We found each other at our weakest hours. You, just banished from Paradise. Me, just booted from Heaven itself.

And through the good, the bad, and everything in between—yes, we've loved. Even when it wasn't perfect. Even when it was sinful and unholy and wrong.

For a thousand lifetimes, I've stolen you, claimed you, made you my captive. My mate. My bride.

My queen.

Over and over again, you've seen me at my most possessive. My most cruel. My worst.

Now, you've finally seen me at my best.

Every time I've lost you through the ages, I've wished that it would kill me too.

Every time I've lived on without you, it's only been with the knowledge that someday, you'll come back to me again.

But this time, we both know that's not in the cards.

Through so many reincarnations of our love, you've died for it. For me.

This time, I've finally found a way to return the favor.

This time, the Almighty has blessed me with the chance to sacrifice myself so you might live for me instead.

I know I'll never see you again, Evie.

I know it's over. I can feel it in my blood, in my bones, in the channels of my heart and the roots of my soul.

But was it worth it? I know you must wonder what I would say to that now that the great battles of our tragic lives are finally done.

The answer is a thankfully simple one: *Yes*.

You bet your perfectly heart-shaped ass it was.

To live with you and love you was the greatest pleasure I've ever known.

To give my life for you was the greatest thing I've ever done.

All I can ask of you is this, love.

Cry for me, if you must.

Miss me. I like the idea of being the one who's missed, for a change.

But more importantly... Laugh for me. Read poetry that makes your heart soar and ache and break. Sing tunes you only know half the words of, just because you like how the melody feels on your tongue. Play our song on the piano and remember the way my hands felt beneath yours. Visit the ocean again. Taste the salt on the wind and let the waves lap at your feet. Stand naked in the rain; relish the chill of it on your skin. Listen to the thunder. Smell the ozone in the air. Bask in the lightning and know that you were loved.

That you *are* loved.

Forever. For eternity.

Until the stars go black, and the river of time runs dry.

Live for me, Evie.

And when you wonder, *would I do it again?*

Know that I would. In a heartbeat.

As sure as the Devil belongs in Hell.

EVIE

This was hell.

I woke up the morning after my coronation to the scent of hellfire and brimstone. Sulfur and soot. The smell of it washed over my face in a humid, panting wave.

I wanted to go back to sleep. Even if it hadn't been for the smell—which was horrible—I would have given anything to just roll over and slip back into the nothingness of unconsciousness.

If I could have done that, I could have just pretended that Luke was in bed next to me, waiting to say, “*Good morning, love. Shall I order up some brekky?*” I could have pretended that he was still here to kiss me. To hold me. To fuck me hard against the mattress and leave me exhausted all over again before the sun even peeked up over the horizon.

If I could have gone back to sleep, I would have pretended this was all just a bad, stupid dream.

Unfortunately, that option wasn't afforded to me.

I was awake—and as the smell I was breathing in got bad enough that it made my sinuses burn, I wasn't even allowed to keep my eyes shut for a little while.

Something warm and wet slicked against my cheek, forcing me to stir.

It was a tongue, I knew—but it definitely wasn't Luke's.

“What the—” I forced my eyes open and bolted upright to see what new terror had come to visit me while I'd slept.

Whatever I'd been expecting, though... it definitely hadn't been *that*.

Sitting there on my lap, panting happily with its little pink tongue hanging out of the side of its mouth, was a...

A corgi?

I blinked and rubbed my eyes.

Maybe I *was* dreaming.

I'd become Queen of Hell last night. I'd lost Luke. Probably forever.

I had a deep-seated suspicion that I was pregnant with his child.

But through everything that had happened...

Not once did I remember anyone mentioning that I'd adopted a chubby, stubby-legged puppy in the process.

That seemed like the kind of thing that someone should have at least given me a heads-up about, anyway.

"Okaaaay." I lifted the corgi up to eye level. Its little stumpy tail wagged happily in response. Beneath my fingers, its fur was thick and soft. "And where did you come from, little guy?"

It felt like the universe was playing some kind of idiotic joke on me.

My husband had been torn away from last night. My soulmate, gone forever. The pain of it still pounded in my chest, threatening to rip my heart into shreds and burn the pieces to ash and dust.

Luke had sacrificed everything for me. Even now, I knew, he was somewhere in the realms of Heaven—being tortured by angels for his sins, no doubt.

And in return...

Fate had sent me a *dog* as part of its condolences?

It was better than a Hallmark *Sorry for your loss* card...

But it was a far cry from making up for the fact that I'd never see my husband again.

The corgi didn't answer me, obviously. I felt stupid for even thinking it might—but then again, crazier things had happened to me in the last several months.

It just nudged my face with its wet little nose and licked my cheek again in response.

"Oh, honey." My throat was tightening all over again, just like it had last night after Luke had left me here in Pandemonium. My sinuses burned for a new reason now. Not just because this adorable puppy had the breath of a demon—but because tears were starting to form in my eyes. "Yes. Okay. You're... you're very cute."

It couldn't bring my husband back, but I appreciated the effort.

I put the corgi back down on my lap. It walked around in two little circles, then curled up on top of my thighs and nestled its head against my hip.

Okay, it was *excessively* cute. Demon breath and all.

But as the tears rolled down my face and my chest was wracked with yet another wave of pain, I knew no amount of cuteness was going to fix this.

The only thing that could was just short of impossible.

But I had to try.

I had no choice.

I had to get Luke back.

And not just for my sake.

I placed my hand on my belly and felt for the flicker of life I'd noticed last night.

I only had to close my eyes and I could see it so perfectly in my mind. A little flame in my womb, growing stronger with every breath I took—even in the moments when I didn't want to be breathing at all anymore.

Luke's child. A baby boy or girl that we'd created together.

Proof that Luke's sacrifice hadn't been in vain.

"My queen?" Charon, clad in his usual suit and white gloves, cracked open the door to the bedroom and peeked inside. "I was wondering—oh." His face fell into a frown. "You're crying."

"It's nothing." I wiped the tears away harder with my fist. It wasn't nothing and I knew it. Every other beat of my heart, the loss of Luke was the only thing I *could* feel. "I'm fine. Did you need something, Charon?"

"I thought I might bring you breakfast in bed, but..." Charon's gaze lowered to the corgi in my lap. His eyes went wide. "Is that...The *Beast*?"

"The...Beast?" I looked down at the corgi, who wiggled his wide hips as he tried to snuggle against me harder.

This mysterious corgi was many things, but a beast he certainly was *not*.

"My queen..." Charon was normally the epitome of composure, but for the first time since I'd met him, he actually looked a little bewildered. "The Beast hasn't been seen in... well, in a very long time. If ever. I've certainly never looked upon it with my own eyes, but..."

“You mean to tell me that *this* little thing is called... *The Beast*.” I blinked, feeling just as bewildered as Charon looked.

This wasn’t the conversation I expected myself having this morning.

When I’d finally cried myself to sleep last night, the only thought in my mind was how I was going to get Luke back.

But now...

This bizarre new situation seemed to have taken precedence. For some godforsaken reason.

“Here.” Charon crossed through the room and reached for the corgi. “Let me take him from you, then—”

“No, it’s fine.” I waved Charon’s hands away. “He’s fine. He can stay.”

A chubby corgi puppy didn’t even come close to making up for everything that had happened, but I couldn’t pretend like it wasn’t at least a little comforting to have something warm and furry that seemed to like me curled up in my lap.

“Ah. Very good, then. In that case...” Charon gestured to the bed. “May I sit?”

“You may...” I said slowly. The second of what I was beginning to fear might be many strange things to come out of Charon’s mouth this morning. “Is everything all right, Charon? I know I’m Queen of Hell and all now, but I’m not really sure I’m feeling up to cackling over hellfire this morning. Or torturing the sinful.” Or whatever the fuck the ruler of Hell was supposed to do.

“I’m sure everything is fine. It’s only... well, the arrival of The Beast is... unprecedented.” Charon seemed extra uncomfortable as he sat on the corner of the bed. “I think you and I might need to have a little talk.”

“About The Beast?” What a ridiculous name for a puppy. It looked like the only thing it was capable of mauling or destroying was a pair of Louboutins—at best.

“No, my queen. About... well...” Charon closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and released it. “Is it possible that you’re pregnant?”

I almost laughed.

I didn’t, but I came pretty damn close.

“I think I might be.” I let out a sigh of my own. As soon as Luke had been forced to leave me, I’d felt a stirring. The potential for a little life inside me, making itself known. “And if I am, I’ve got an even longer day ahead of me than I expected.”

“The Beast wouldn’t be here if you weren’t,” Charon explained. “It was foretold centuries ago, but to be frank with you, my queen, we here in Hell were beginning to think it wasn’t possible.”

“For me to get pregnant?”

Charon’s eyes turned a shade sadder. “For you to survive long enough to find out whether you could get pregnant or not.”

“Well, I didn’t think it was possible for angels to steal my husband away,” I countered. “I think we might be dealing with a lot of impossible things from here on out, Charon. More than either of us know how to deal with.”

“Then how may I be of assistance, Your Majesty?” Charon placed his hand on my knee over the blankets and gave me a fatherly squeeze. “I know this all must be so much for you, and coming so fast, all at once, as well.”

“You can say that again.” I sniffed, rubbed my eyes one last time, and nodded. “But there is one thing you can do for me.” I considered it for a second, then corrected myself. “Two, actually.”

“Anything, my queen.”

“First, I’m going to need you to get in touch with...” I wracked my brain for who I should even turn to first. “Everyone, I guess. The Fallen. Mal and Don and Legion. The Fourth, if he’ll come. My friends. And my parents, too, if they’re still around.”

“Your friends and family were all given rooms in the Inferno after the...ah, the coronation, last night. I believe your friends briefed your parents on... the current situation.” I could tell that Charon was as reluctant to mention Luke’s sacrifice as I was to tell him we weren’t calling a puppy *The Beast*. “They can be summoned and brought here shortly. It will be no problem at all.”

“Good.” That was a relief. The Fallen and Luke’s other allies could help me figure out how to rescue him. As for my friends and parents... I just wanted to be close to the people I cared about most right now.

They were all I had left.

“And your other request, Your Majesty?”

“A pregnancy test,” I said. “And maybe some Gatorade. As certain as you sound about... *The Beast* being an omen of my pregnancy...” I scratched The Beast behind his floppy little ears and felt him kick gently

against my hip in response. “I’d like to be sure too. The normal, *human* kind of sure.”

Even if I wasn’t entirely human anymore. There was more fire in me now than just the little flame in my belly. I could feel it crackling and churning hot and hungry in my very soul.

“Right away.” Charon rose and gave me a low bow. “Your wish is my command.”

CHARON RETURNED an hour later with a big black gift bag. His absence had given me time to shower in my brand new royal en suite and brush my teeth. I’d meant to shave, too, but when I ran my hand over my calves, I discovered that they didn’t have hair on them anymore.

That, along with a pair of black wings on my back that seemed to have disappeared while I slept, seemed to be Luke’s coronation presents to me.

He’d become an angel all over again to keep me safe after he’d placed the crown on my head last night. In the process, he’d made me more than just Queen of Hell.

I was infernal now, too. I had control of Hell, all the power of the Devil himself... and sinfully smooth legs.

It was a nice touch, but hardly worth losing Luke over.

I would have gladly lived the rest of my life with scratchy, prickly calves if it meant I could have Luke back.

The Beast—a name I guessed I would have to keep calling him by until I came up with something better—raced across the room and yipped at Charon’s ankles as he brought me what I’d asked for.

“I hope it’s all right,” Charon said, handing me the bag. “I wasn’t sure exactly which of the tests I should buy, so...”

I shifted the tissue paper aside and almost laughed. “There are twenty different pregnancy tests in this bag, Charon.” And three different flavors of Gatorade, for that matter.

He gave me a sad smile. “I bought every one I could find. Just in case.”

“Well... thank you.” I cracked open one of the bottles of Gatorade and took a swig of purple liquid. It was pleasantly cold and fruity against my parched tongue... but I almost felt bad for even enjoying it.

How could I enjoy anything now, knowing that somewhere in the realm of the angels, Luke was almost certainly being put through the greatest

pain of his life?

"I'm just sorry I took so long," said Charon. "We're a little understaffed today, unfortunately."

"Are we?" Staffing issues were another thing I hadn't planned on dealing with this morning. We were in Hell, after all. Where else did the staff have to go? "Who's missing?"

"Phlegyas," Charon said solemnly. "He hasn't been seen since before the coronation."

"Oh." As if my heart needed to break a little more. Phlegyas, the Inferno's elevator operator, had always been kind to me. His fatherly smile had been a comfort during all of my pre-coronation worries—which I now knew were more than justified—and being able to talk to him had always given me a little more strength. "Is he okay? You don't think the angels might have—"

"I'm not sure," Charon admitted. "I'm looking into it. Until then, I'll, ah..." He stooped to pick up The Beast, then backed away, bowing. "I'll give you a little space. There are fresh gowns for you in the wardrobe, and the guests you've summoned will be waiting in the throne room when you're ready. Just come outside and I'll take you right there."

"Thank you, Charon." I tried my best to force a smile, but I knew it didn't make it to my eyes. "I mean it. You're a saint."

"Hardly a *saint*," Charon scoffed. "Merely a servant. You're Queen of Hell now, Your Majesty. Anything you need, it's my duty to provide."

When Charon closed the door behind him, I knew I should have probably started chugging Gatorade so I could commence with peeing on some sticks.

But what I really wanted to do was cry some more. Maybe scream. At the very least, I wanted to swear.

An emphatic *God dammit!* seemed appropriate right about now.

But when I opened my mouth, I remembered the last words of Voltaire instead.

"Now, now my good man, this is no time to be making enemies."

Of course, he'd said that when he was asked to renounce Satan on his deathbed, whereas I would have given anything just to have Satan back here in my arms right now.

If only *speaking of the devil and he doth appear* had been true.

Halfheartedly, I swallowed as much of the Gatorade I could stomach and took the bag of tests into the bathroom.

If Luke had put a baby in me before he'd sacrificed himself, he'd given me more than just eternal life.

He'd given me something to live for while I figured out how to rescue him.

I wasn't leaving this room until I knew for sure.

EVIE

I walked into the throne room wearing a dress fit for a queen. If that wasn't enough to prove my new station here in Hell, the heavy crown I wore on top of my head left no room for doubt.

The gown was long, black, and hugged my curves like it was trying to make up for the loss of my husband. The crown was golden. It dripped with rubies and diamonds like drops of blood and falling stars.

I had no idea how to rule Hell without Luke. But at least, thanks to my regal new wardrobe, I knew I looked the part.

I still didn't know how I was going to get him back. But thanks to the pregnancy test I held in my hand, I knew more than ever that I had no choice.

I wasn't going to raise this baby alone.

Even if I had to burn Heaven to the ground to save him, I would.

Before me, a long black carpet stretched out down the center of the room. It led to a huge, high-backed throne wrought from black metal and golden skulls with red-jeweled eyes.

It was intimidating even just to look at.

Almost as intimidating as the realization that every set of eyes in the throne room was locked right on me as my golden heels carried me inside.

The Fallen were all present, just like Charon had promised. On either side of the throne, they stood in formation, all dressed in black. Mourning clothes, to honor the king that they'd lost.

Beelzebub—Zeb—wore an Armani suit and looked me up and down like I was something he'd like to have in his handsome, smirking mouth.

Short, slender Mulciber twisted the hem of his dark tunic in his artist's fists. Mammon, ancient and hunched, licked his lips as I approached. Moloch—Lock's—mouth was set in a firm, hard line as he stood tall in a darker version of his tartan kilt.

Only beautiful, dark-haired Belial offered me a proper smile when she saw me—but it felt fake somehow, coming from her curling blood-red lips.

“Good morning, Your Majesty. Long live the queen,” she purred—then, to my surprise, she lowered herself to her knees.

One by one, the other Fallen followed suit.

Off to the side, I spotted Abaddon and Malacoda—Don and Mal—two of Luke's closest allies. With the single exception of Lock, I trusted the two of them more than I trusted all of the other Fallen put together.

Don gave me a tiny flash of smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. He was dressed in his typical 1950s-style suit, but he seemed to have left his usual suave smirk at the door. Mal, who wore a pair of dark jeans and a black button-down with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, gave me a small nod of acknowledgment. Even from across the room, I could see the grief in his eyes.

I appreciated it. They loved Luke too. At least I knew they understood exactly what I'd lost.

What we'd all lost.

Together, they bent the knee to me as well.

Legion, with her dark cloud of sleek, coiled hair, wore a leather vest and matching pants. She looked beautiful and dangerous as ever, but her deep brown skin wasn't shimmering with glitter like it normally did. There was only one of her at the moment. Either her multiple forms had all converged for the occasion, or she'd sent them off to grieve in private.

As her black eyes met mine, she knelt with the others.

I guessed that meant she'd accepted me as her queen now, too.

I looked to the other side of the carpet, where my best friends were gathered in a little cluster. Ava looked like she'd been crying. Her cheeks were puffy and pink beneath her freckles. Her red hair hung down around her face like a bloody veil. Bea was tall and regal, with her chestnut hair pulled back into a severe bun. Joan had her jaw set hard, right in line with her black bob. They were both putting on a good show of looking stoic, but I knew them too well to be fooled by that.

They knew how much I loved Luke.

They must have known the pain I felt now that he was gone, too.

Behind them, my parents both looked heartbroken. Dad had his arm around my mom, who was openly tear-faced. She dabbed at her cheeks with a tissue and took a step forward, like she wanted to come hold me—but then, she saw how the others were kneeling.

She knelt as well, followed by my father, then my friends.

I think that broke my heart most of all.

For a horrible moment, I wanted to scream at them. They were still human, even if I wasn't anymore. Just because I was queen now, I wasn't *their* queen.

I didn't want to be knelt at or bowed to or anything of the sort.

I wanted my mother to hug me and my father to reassure me that everything was all right. I wanted my friends at my side, not kneeling on the floor.

I wanted someone to tell me that Luke's sacrifice could be undone.

I wanted someone to tell me how the fuck we were going to bring him back. I didn't want to rule Hell alone. I didn't want to rule Hell at *all*—but if I had to, I wanted it to be *with* him. Not dimensions apart.

Today, more than ever, I knew he should have been standing here at my side.

But I was a queen now. It wasn't other people's job to console me.

I was supposed to be the one calling the shots.

"Thank you all for coming," I said to them all as I came to a stop, still several yards away from the throne. "It means the world to me that you're here. But please, stop kneeling. You don't need to."

I scanned the faces of my friends, my parents, and Luke's allies. I pleaded to them with my eyes. *I'm still your daughter. I'm still your friend.*

But even if my heart was broken, I could still read a fucking room.

They all saw me differently now.

Considering the way they'd watched Luke give up his satanic wings for me last night, only for a matching pair of black feathered ones to spring from my back in return, maybe they were right to.

I sighed.

They expected me to act like a queen right now, but I had no idea how.

“I’m pregnant,” I said. Suddenly, my voice couldn’t have been smaller. Or more tired, for that matter. I held up the test so they could all see it. “I don’t know how, or when it happened, but... I’m going to have a child. So, I’d appreciate it if you’d all get up off your knees and help me figure out how to get my husband back.”

“You’re *what*?”

The question came from so many mouths, all at the same time, if I’d been in any other mood but this one, I might have laughed.

My mother’s eyes were suddenly wide with surprise. My father’s brow was knitted with disbelief. My friends all looked more worried than ever.

And as for the Fallen—

There was a big, glaring smile on each and every set of their lips now.

“You are certain, *bella*?” Mammon rose first, springing up to his feet like a man a quarter of his age. He rubbed his hands together like a praying mantis as he rushed over to me. “If this is true—*la realtà*—”

I offered him the pregnancy test. He grabbed it greedily and studied it with intense curiosity.

“What is this?” he asked, squinting at it. “Some sort of new infernal device, yes?”

“It’s a pregnancy test,” I explained. I wondered if it was worth mentioning that I’d just, uh, peed on one end of it just a few minutes ago before I’d placed the cap back on, but Mammon had a history of being a weird little creep and there were some things best left unsaid. “It’s how humans determine whether or not they’re, ah, with child. Charon bought me about two dozen of them. I tried them all.” After a *lot* of Gatorade, I didn’t bother adding. “They all said the same thing.”

“Human tests might not work for you now, though.” Mulciber approached me tentatively, but there was a wild look in his eyes like he wanted to believe. “If we had true proof—if only The Beast had arrived—”

I sighed and looked behind me, where Charon stood in waiting at the doors.

“Let him in.” I gave Charon a nod.

Charon opened the doors again. A frantic clicking sound echoed from the hallway outside, getting louder and louder until the corgi puppy that had been licking my face when I woke up that morning raced inside. The Beast’s little pink tongue lolled out of his mouth with excitement. He ran

up to my feet, settled his chubby backside down in front of them, and gave a single, high-pitched *yip!*

“The Beast is here.” I gestured down to the corgi, who was panting happily. He still didn’t look like a beast to me, but if that was what the Fallen were calling him too, I guessed it was too late to go changing his name now. “If a pregnancy test won’t assure you, I assume he’s proof enough?”

“More than enough.” Zeb strode forward and bowed low to me. He took my hand in his, then brought it up to his lips and kissed it. A little too passionately for my liking—and the dark glint in his eyes felt like bad news, too. “You’ve done it, Your Majesty. Congratulations. *Very* well done.”

“After millennia of fruitless waiting, Hell will finally have an heir to its throne.” Belial’s smile softened into something that almost looked warm and kind as she nudged Zeb aside and embraced me. “You’re going to be such a beautiful mother, darling. I simply can’t wait.”

“Ah, *perfezione, Madonna! Congratulazioni!* Why, with a child on the way, we must hold a board meeting immediately.” Mammon gave a brief scowl to my parents and friends, who were still frozen in shock and looking a little lost. “Once your pet humans are gone, of course.”

“They’re not my pets.” I glanced over at my friends and parents with an apologetic look in my eyes. They all still looked too stunned to even react.

“As you say. But stocks will be down with Luke’s absence. This news is *exactly* what we need right now. And as the new CEO of Adversary Industries, we’ll have so much to discuss before the boy’s birth.”

“We don’t know that it’ll be a boy.” I took a step back, furrowing my brow. “And...CEO? Mammon, I don’t want that. That’s Luke’s job. Not mine. Right now, all things considered, I’d rather focus our efforts on—”

“A bacchanal, of course.” Belial cut me off as she swatted Mammon away from me. “We’ll drink gallons of wine to Luke’s memory—and to you, and to the baby, of course. Then we’ll start a fire, maybe have a little fairy dust from Avalon, see where the night takes us...” She laughed and clapped her hands together in delight. “It’ll be *just* the thing to perk you up.”

“I’m not drinking anything, Bell.” My frown deepened. Wine? Fairy dust—whatever that was. Was she serious right now? “I’m pregnant—and

I don't want a bacchanal. What I *want* is to—"

"Finally finish the nursery!" I'd never seen Mulciber look happier. He was already reaching for the tube of design plans and blueprints he always kept strapped across his back. "I've been waiting an eternity—literally. And now that we know they'll be needed..."

"I'm not doing that either." Heat simmered in my chest, getting hotter by the minute. "This isn't the time for interior design planning. Right now, we need to—"

"We need to take care of *you*, Your Majesty." Zeb swept the others away and stepped forward again. Once more, he took my hand in his. "You're going through so much right now. I understand. I feel for you."

"Uh... thank you, Zeb." I hadn't counted on Zeb being the voice of reason this morning, but at least he was advocating for me. If he could just keep the others at bay for long enough, I might be able to get a word in edgewise so we could start planning for Luke's rescue. "That's... very sweet. I appreciate it."

"Losing your husband to the angels, finding out you're with child, becoming Queen of Hell—and all in less than twenty-four hours." Zeb squeezed my hand. "This is no time to be overwhelming you with petty details or parties or talk of business. Whatever you need right now, I want you to know that I'm here for you."

"Um. Thanks," I said again. I wasn't sure that I entirely bought the charade of sympathy coming from the Lord of the Flies himself, but it was better than Mammon's and Mulciber's and Belial's pestering. "In that case, what I need is—"

"A shoulder to cry on," Zeb cut me off. Infuriatingly. Even as their queen, not a single one of the Fallen seemed to have any interest in letting me finish. "A strong, capable man to take care of you here in your greatest hour of need."

"Uh. Well, I don't think that's..." I began, but it was no use.

This time, when Zeb lowered himself, he only dropped down to one knee. His dark eyes stared up at me, intensely passionate.

Amorous, even.

Oh, fuck no.

"You lost a husband last night," said Zeb. A buzzing sound began to fill the air around us. "Something that no woman should ever have to

endure. It would be my honor, my queen—my beautiful Evelyn—if you would allow me the pleasure of taking his place.”

I gaped at him in disbelief. Rage unfurled within my chest and fire burned at my fingertips, sparking to life as I tore my hand away from his.

“I don’t need a new husband,” I snapped at him, scowling. “Nor do I need to attend a board meeting, or get drunk and have an orgy, or pick out fucking... wallpaper!”

“But—” Zeb started, but I stopped him with a single, furious glare.

“I *have* a husband, Zeb.” I raised my hand to him so he could see the ring Luke had given me, still glimmering there on my finger. “And you still have a king. Just because Luke has gone back to Heaven doesn’t mean that he’s dead, and I’d appreciate it if you would all stop acting like it. Shape up, stop cutting me off, and *listen* to me for one second, will you?”

The Beast barked loudly at the Fallen as I took several steps back from them. I couldn’t believe the gall of them all. Here I was, pregnant and heartbroken and desperate to find some way to rescue Luke, and all they could think of were their petty desires and ploys for power?

As I took a final step away from them, I bumped into something big and firm at my back.

For a moment, I thought maybe it was Lock, backing me up—but then I turned to find a huge figure in a leather jacket and a shiny black motorcycle helmet.

The Fourth. He’d shown up after all.

At his presence and my rage, the Fallen all took a few steps back of their own.

“*Out.*” The Fourth’s voice boomed, impossibly deep, as he stuck out a thumb and jerked it toward the door. “*Now.*”

I knew The Fourth to be a man of very few words. In fact, I couldn’t recall him ever speaking at all before. But the way he commanded Luke’s inner circle of fallen angels...

I certainly wouldn’t have disobeyed him. The Fallen seemed to be of the same opinion.

Sulking and scowling, they trailed out of the throne room one by one. Only Lock remained behind.

“Thank you,” I whispered as I turned to The Fourth. He was so much taller than me, I had to crane my neck just to look up at him properly. Maybe my eyes were deceiving me, but in that moment, he looked nearly

seven feet tall—with the impossibly broad shoulders and thick, muscular arms to match his frame.

The Fourth didn't say anything back to me, nor did he take off his helmet. Beneath it, though, I knew he had a handsome face, dark hair, and soft, kind eyes.

As he gave me a single nod, I could feel the kindness in those eyes washing over me from behind his visor. I didn't have to see them to know it.

He felt bad about how all of this had gone down too.

Without another word, The Fourth followed the Fallen out.

It was quiet and tense for a long stretch of time after they left. I almost couldn't bear to look at my friends or my parents. I didn't know what they thought of me now that I was... whatever I was.

Infernal. A demon-thing. Queen of Hell.

But then, my mother moved toward me. She took me into her arms and held me in a tight, warm hug like I was a child again.

In an instant, for the first time since Luke had left me here in the palace we should have shared for the rest of our lives, I felt like maybe everything might be okay.

Or at least, like we might all find a way to put this right.

"Oh, Evie. Come here. I've gotcha." Mom stroked the back of my head like I'd just woken up from a nightmare. "The things you've been through... I'm so sorry, sweetie."

"We're proud of you, princess." Dad joined in on the hug from the side. "Or..." He chuckled and gave me a kiss just beneath the jewels of my crown. "Do I need to start calling you *queen* now?"

"I'll always be your princess, Dad." A laugh escaped my lips even though tears were forming in my eyes. Relief. After all they'd seen... even after the revelation that Heaven and Hell were real realms, that my husband was Satan himself and that now, I'd taken Luke's place as ruler of the damned... my parents still loved me. It was something—a small comfort in what had been starting to feel like a cold and comfortless new chapter. "I'm so sorry about everything. Thank you so much for being here for me anyway."

"Oh, Evie. What in the name of..." Mom pulled back, looked around, and laughed. There were tears in her eyes too. "Well. In the name of *this place* do you have to be sorry about?"

“Where the hell else would we be?” Dad added, squeezing a little tighter.

“I mean... I *did* marry the Devil without telling you.” I winced. My parents weren’t *that* Catholic, but they still did Christmas and Easter. I didn’t imagine getting hitched to Satan himself that was something most God-fearing mothers and fathers would appreciate. “If this is all a little much to wrap your heads around right now, I’d understand.”

“Can hardly blame you,” Mom said with a snort. “I *do* have eyes, Evie. Lookin’ like the way he does...”

“I didn’t hate him,” Dad mumbled in gruff agreement. “And you loved him. Still do. I can tell. Devil or not, that’s all that matters now.”

“Well...” Mom pursed her lips as she glanced at Dad, then gave me a tentative smile. “And there *is* one other thing. If I heard you right... if you’re serious...” Her smile widened. “Are we really going to be grandparents? You’re sure?”

“Mammon ran off with the pregnancy test, but...” I nodded. “I’m sure. There are two dozen other positive tests back in my bedroom here if you need more proof.”

“Oh, sweetie!” Mom squeezed me again, hard enough to force the air from my lungs. “We’re so happy for you. You just tell us what you need—anything at all.”

“I think what I need right now... is a plan.” I looked to my friends. To Legion and Lock and Mal and Don. “I know it probably sounds crazy, but I want to rescue Luke from Heaven. Whatever the deal he struck with the angels at the coronation—surely it can be unstruck, right?”

Lock, Mal and Don shared a tense look.

“There are... ways, aye.” Lock was the first to speak, breaking the tension with his burly Scottish brogue. “But ye won’t like any of them, I fear.”

“We’re at your service, Your Majesty,” Don added. “But Lock is right. We have options. Just not many good ones.”

“And as little as you’ll like ‘em, Luke will hate ‘em even more,” Mal drawled with a soft chuckle. “Not that it matters. If he didn’t want us goin’ and doin’ something shit-for-brains, he shoulda thought about that before he went and got his wings back.”

“Good.” My chest was tight as I wondered what *shit-for-brains* things we might be getting ourselves into here, but I was grateful that the others

were in agreement.

We were going to rescue Luke. It was what he would have done for me. One way or another, I was getting him back.

“The Fallen can’t be trusted to help with this, though.” Legion came to me and rested a hand on my shoulder. Her dark eyes were gentle, but her lips were set with worry. “You heard Beelzebub. He’s already looking for a way to make himself king. Mulciber is harmless, and Belial’s whims are unpredictable, but Mammon will want to find a way to turn Luke’s absence to his benefit, too. They have more freedom than ever now that Luke is away. They won’t be keen to be under his thumb again.”

“I don’t trust the Fallen at all,” I said simply, then looked to Lock. “No offense. Current company excluded, of course.”

“No offense taken, lass.” Lock gave a short, sharp snort. “You’re right not to trust them. We may’ve all fallen together, but now that the powers of Hell are out of sorts... They’ll be just as happy to watch things fall apart.”

“We should start planning right away, then,” said Don. “Before the Fallen start making plans of their own.”

“Maybe not *right* away.” Bea’s voice called out from behind Don. She pushed past him and took my hand in hers. Ava and Joan fell in close behind. “You’re pregnant, Eves. And if you’re happy, we’re happy for you...”

“But you look like hell right now.” Joan said, putting it bluntly. She usually did.

I laughed. “That’s fair. I feel like it, too.”

“That buzzing guy was right, though,” said Ava. “Not about trying to marry you—that was weird—but about you needing to take care of yourself. Have you even gotten breakfast yet? And are you sure you should be walking around in those ankle breakers?” Ava nodded at my heels, which admittedly, *were* starting to make my feet hurt.

“That crown looks pretty heavy, too, princess.” Dad looked me in the eyes as he raised his hands to it. An offer.

I nodded, then lowered my head to him so he could lift it up off of me. Its absence was a relief. Almost like without it, I could just be his daughter again. Just his princess—not a queen.

“Let’s get you into something comfortable and get some food in you,” Bea offered. “Then, you and the boys can start dreaming up rescue plans.”

“Aye,” Lock agreed. “We’ll need a mighty fine one if this is going to work, but we’re with ye, lass. Heaven’s stolen yer man. We’ll help ye get him back.”

“Meanwhile...” Mom looked to Dad with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “I think we’ve still got some baby clothes up in the attic back home. And that adorable little crib we used to have for Evie...”

“Would make sense to get a little more use out of it,” Dad said with a nod. “Might, ah... build a few bookshelves to match it, maybe? If the kiddo is anything like Evie, they’ll probably like to read...”

As they continued to make plans for their future grandchild, I stared at them for a long moment, relieved and a little stunned.

My parents hadn’t changed a bit. They still loved me. My friends were still here for me. Luke’s allies were willing to help me.

These realms that now ruled my life were still scary, uncertain things, but together, I knew, we could face them all.

It was only a matter of time before I was in Luke’s arm again. Queen of Hell—with an heir to the throne in my belly and my king once again at my side.

We just had to rescue him from whatever terrors he’d found in Heaven first.

LUKE

“**T**his will hurt,” said Michael as he leveled the tip of the nail against the center of my palm. He didn’t look like he was about to enjoy driving it through my hand with the hammer he held in his fist. A relief.

“Yes,” I agreed, meeting his eyes. “I suppose it will.”

The archangel Michael and I had been friends, once upon an eternity. We’d laughed together. We’d planted a garden on Earth beneath the newborn sun, working side by side.

We’d watched the creation of the very first humans together.

That was where our friendship had taken a turn.

He’d seen them as dangerous. Creatures that needed to be controlled. For all I’d seen of humanity’s evils, he might have been right, too.

But I’d always seen them as just... people. Utterly unique creatures with joys and sorrows and heartaches who deserved the chance to make their own destinies. People who deserved to be free.

In hindsight, it was hard to say which had really happened first for me: falling from Heaven, falling in love with humanity...

Or falling for her.

Whichever was true, it didn’t matter.

I’d been damned for it anyway, and I was damned to this fate now.

As Michael brought down his hammer and sent the nail deep through my palm, a ragged snarl of pain left my lips. White-hot pain wracked through my body. Beads of sweat formed on my brow.

“Repent, and it will be over.” Michael’s voice held a regret in it I hadn’t heard in a long time. For so many centuries, we’d been enemies. It was strange, through the haze of agony, to hear him to speak to me like a friend again. “I’ll pull out the nail. You can rejoin the armies of Heaven. We can forget that this ever happened at all.”

Slowly, I shook my head. “I can’t repent, and you know it.”

“And why not?” Michael moved my free hand to the piece of lumber that stretched across my bare shoulders. I’d removed my shirt, along with my socks and shoes, before this started. When I made this deal with Michael, I’d accepted my fate. I wasn’t about break my vow now, no matter the pain. But I hadn’t seen any reason to let this punishment ruin a perfectly good shirt.

“Because of what you want me to repent for.”

“Repentance for sin isn’t hard. Acknowledge it. Accept what you’ve done. Let the love of Heaven fill your heart once more and agree to become better. Simple as that.”

“You think my sin is her.” I shook my head as Michael pressed the nail against my palm. “I can’t repent for something I don’t regret.”

“Your sin is *pride*, you stubborn bastard.” Michel’s lips curled and strained as he pounded the second nail into my hand, pinning it firmly to the wooden cross I now bore.

The pain hit me again, intense enough that my vision went white with it.

In that blinding whiteness, I tried to remember the way her eyes looked when she’d smiled at me.

I found that I could. Easily. They were a lovely gray that lit up like a stormy sky just before lightning struck.

It made everything hurt just a little bit less.

“Yes. Pride. Maybe so.” I had to force the words through gritted teeth as my vision returned and I looked up to Michael again. “I’m proud that she’s mine. If that’s a sin, then what can I say?” I forced my lips into a grin. “I’m sinner.”

“You’re an angel,” Michael scoffed back at me. “And she was never anything more than another silly human, Lucifer. When will you finally learn? Your love was never meant to be. Your *sin* is believing that you could twist fate in your favor anyway.”

Even as my blood—pearly and opalescent again now, where for so long, it had been black as night—ran down my wrist, I couldn't help it. I laughed through the pain.

"She's not a human anymore." It was my single triumph in all of this. In his desire to bring me back into the fold, Michael had caused that turn of events himself. When I crowned Evie, I made her my queen. When I'd let Michael take my wings, I'd abdicated the throne of Hell to her.

Hell couldn't be ruled by a mere mortal, though. She'd taken on my devilishness along with her new title.

Evie wasn't human at all now. She was infernal. An immortal queen to take the place of the king that Hell had just lost.

Now, no one would ever be able to hurt her again.

If Michael was bothered by the reminder of it, he didn't make any indication of it.

Instead, he dropped to his knees and positioned the last nail—the longest of the three—against my feet.

I knew this one would hurt most of all.

"I wish you would stop fighting me." Michael raised the hammer and looked up at me. There was something almost pleading in his eyes.

Give in, they said. Don't make me do this. All of this can end here and now. You can make this stop any time you want.

"I wish I could," I admitted. If all of this had played out differently, we could have remained friends through all these centuries instead of warring as enemies.

But he'd chosen his side long ago. And if my choice was between Evie and Heaven...

I'd choose her every damn time.

It was such an easy decision, it hardly felt like a choice at all.

He drove the nail into my feet with a single, swift blow. Its tip pierced through the top of one, just above my toes, then passed into the top of the other.

It burned hotter than any hellfire I'd ever known.

Distantly, I was aware that I was screaming. My vision left me again. This time, its color wasn't white. This time, it went as black as a starless night.

Within that darkness, for a moment, I was certain that I could see her.

She danced before my eyes beneath the soft glow of a spotlight. Her hair hung down in its blonde waves, golden and shimmering. The smile on her lips sent warmth rising up within my chest. Dark-feathered wings spread from behind her, beautiful and entirely her own. The way her hips moved, the fullness of her breasts—in an instant, my cock began to stiffen in response. I only got harder as I saw the look in her hooded eyes, wicked and full of promises to match as she reached out to me, caressing my cheek.

Yes. I may have been an angel again now, and she, a devil of her own right, but she was mine.

My Evie, more herself than ever before.

My bride. My queen. My wife.

“Lucifer,” she purred against my ear as she took me into her embrace. My body was weary with pain, but I rose to her anyway. *“I love you. I miss you. It’s going to be all right.”*

Her lips brushed against mine, so tantalizing my breath caught in my throat with hope.

Even if I hung here in Heaven on the cross that I was distantly still aware my body was nailed to for the rest of eternity, I’d spend every minute of it yearning to feel her lips against mine again.

“Lucifer.” Her lips brushed against mine and an explosion of heat burst inside me.

She was wildfire, and I was a forest. My hands burned with how badly I wanted to touch her. My feet strained against the nail that held them down, desperate to follow as she moved away.

“Lucifer!”

I blinked and my vision faded back in. Evie was gone once more. The voice that was calling out to me now wasn’t hers at all.

Michael’s fingers twisted my hair at the back of my skull as he lifted my head up. He forced my eyes to meet his.

“What happened?” I murmured. My body felt heavy and full of pins.

“You passed out.” Mournfully, Michael shook his head. *“From the pain, probably. Frankly, I’m surprised it took you as long as it did.”*

“Put me back under then.” My voice sounded drunk. It echoed strangely in my ears. *“I want to kiss my wife.”*

“Is that what you were doing while you were unconscious?” Michael dropped my head unceremoniously. *“You’re predictable, Lucifer. You*

never learn, do you?”

“Maybe I’ve got a shitty teacher.”

“Shut up and stay conscious.” Michael rose to his feet as the door to the room opened. Gabe came through it, his white wings visible at his back and his face looking grim. “Now that you can’t leave—”

“Wasn’t trying to,” I murmured back at him. “You really think you could have nailed me down if I had any intention of putting up a fight?”

Michael ignored my comment. Probably because he couldn’t think of anything clever to say back to it. “We have something to show you, Lucifer. You’d do well to pay attention to it.”

Michael nodded at Gabe, who waved his hand through the air before me. I struggled to lift my head so I could peer through it.

I didn’t know what I was expecting. Heavenly family Christmas party photos? The *Minions* movie on repeat? The possibilities for the next torture Michael planned on trying to break me with were endless.

But whatever I might have expected, I never would have guessed what I saw.

Through the portal, lush greenery sprawled out as far as the eye could see. Fragrant flowers were in full bloom. A warm, humid breeze kissed my cheeks, teasing me.

I didn’t know what I was looking at and I didn’t care to try and figure it out.

All I could think was how much I would have preferred to have Evie’s lips against my cheeks instead.

“Been doing some gardening, have you?” My throat was raw.

“No. But it would seem that you have.” Michael gestured to the portal. A pair of Fennec foxes were frolicking in the foreground, chasing butterflies. Somewhere out of sight, I could hear the churning of a waterfall. “This is the Sahara, Lucifer.”

I forced a laugh. “Is this your latest ploy? Fucking with my head?”

The Sahara was a barren wasteland. It was right there in the name—*Sahara*. The Arabic word for desert. Didn’t get any more literal than that.

But then, I thought of the flowers that Don and I had found blooming there outside of Alexander’s tomb when we went to collect the final nail—the one that currently pinned my feet to the length of wood that pressed against my heel.

Could it be...?

No. Surely not.

Those flowers had bloomed because of my love for Evie. Now that I knew we'd never see each other again, there was no reason it would be anything more than hot sun and dry sand.

"We're not toying with you, Lucifer," Michael said sternly. "We have no reason to lie. Not now."

"Well, I certainly haven't gone sowing any seeds *there*." After my last gardening debacle on Earth—the planting of the eglantine roses whose vines I'd tried to climb back up into Heaven on—I'd regulated all of attentions of my green thumb to Hell.

"No," Michael agreed. "But you *have* been sowing your seed, haven't you?"

I furrowed my brow as I met his eyes. "Why are showing me this, Michael? Speak plainly, my ears are still ringing from these fucking nails you've driven through me."

"Because you deserve to know." Michael looked at the nail in my bloodied left hand with regret. "We're not monsters, Lucifer. Those were the only way we could assure that you'd stay here and keep your end of the deal once you learned the truth."

"And here I am." My mouth was as dry as the so-called desert I was currently gawking at should have been. "Get on with it, then."

"Your woman is pregnant and it's fucking up the balance of the Earth," Gabriel blurted out before Michael could open his mouth. He glared at me, then added, as an afterthought: "Dumbass."

My mouth fell open slightly as I tried to think of an insult to shoot back at Gabe. The only thing that came to mind was *takes one to know one*. My brain obviously wasn't firing on all cylinders.

I was lucky it was still firing at all.

"I'm afraid that's not possible," I finally said. My heart was thrumming with the elation of a *what if* in my chest, but I swallowed hard to force the feeling down. "She has a—"

"Birth control implant?" Michael crossed his arms over his chest. He couldn't have looked less amused. "Not *has*. Had. It was removed. Very much not part of our plan, but..."

"Nothing we can do about it now." Gabe glowered. "Congratulations, adversary. It's at great cost, of course... but you've finally won."

I looked between the two of them, still struggling to hold my head up through the pain that shot through my hands and feet. My eyes searched for the slightest hint of a lie in either of their faces.

I blinked as I failed to find one.

Evie. Pregnant. I understood the words independently of each other, but together?

Together, they meant so much, for a moment the pain in my body was entirely overwhelmed.

The excitement of it struck me again. My Evie. My bride. My child in her womb, growing stronger every day. Making the Earth's greatest desert bloom and flourish into a jungle before they were even born.

The vision of Evie my subconscious had conjured when I was knocked out had been exquisite. Beautiful beyond any other beauty I'd ever known.

But imagining her pregnant—belly growing firm and round, skin shining, breasts swelling with milk— It was a damn good thing I was in too much agony to actually get hard right now.

It was an even greater agony to realize that I'd never see her again, knowing what I knew now.

But my excitement and my pain were selfish things to think about in this moment. Impossible to deny, but far from the full picture.

This child would make me a father. Hell would finally have an heir. And for Evie, if she was happy about it—god, I hoped she was—she would have some small part of me there with her still. Even as I was torn apart here in Heaven, there would still be something for her to remember me. A baby. Our own creation. Ours and ours alone.

It meant everything to me.

But it meant things for Earth, too. Not all of them necessarily good.

"The Sahara blooming isn't even the half of it." Michael's voice was suddenly cold. He didn't look like he regretted driving those nails through my skin so much anymore. "The world we created for the humans is more out of balance than it's ever been. Across thousands and thousands of years of struggle, we've fought against each other over this, Lucifer."

"You, creating chaos. Us, trying to set things right." Gabe closed the portal to the Sahara with a sharp, sudden wave of his hand. "Now, you've finally managed to tip the scales in your favor, you bastard."

"You know what comes next, Lucifer." Michael licked his lips almost nervously. His eyes softened, pleading with me again. "If this child is born

—if he’s allowed to grow into a man...”

“He’ll bring the world to destruction.” I stared up at him with a steely gaze. Michael was trying to make it sound like he was playing the voice of reason to me, but I knew the beginning of a threat when I heard one. “I know what your prophecies say.”

“And you don’t care?”

Gabe scoffed. “Of course he doesn’t. You can take the Devil out of Hell, but you can’t take Hell out of the Devil. He doesn’t give a damn if the world burns. He never loved the humans to begin with. Only *her*.”

I could have argued with him, but it would have been splitting hairs.

Would I sacrifice all of humanity for the lives of my wife and unborn child?

In an instant. Just as quickly as I’d sacrificed myself.

Gabe was right. I supposed I really was still the devil after all.

“You want to save the Earth? Let me go, then,” I suggested, nodding to the nail through my right hand. “A child shouldn’t have to grow up without a father. Maybe in taking me from its life, you’ve set your own prophecy into motion.”

“Or, more likely, in insisting to marry your very own forbidden fruit over and over again throughout the ages, you’ve assured that the prophecy will be fulfilled yourself.” Michael shook his head. “I’m not letting you go, Lucifer. I’m asking you to repent for your sins because despite all of them, I still love you like a brother.”

“You’re asking me to repent for my so-called sins,” I spat back at him, “Because you’re hoping if I do it, I’ll help you kill my own child so you can keep your hands clean.”

“That *child* will grow into an adult, Lucifer! He’ll bring about the Final Hour. The End of Days themselves! If you love your precious humans so much, why don’t you care that they’ll all die because of what you’ve done?” Michael’s brow was knitted with rage.

“I do care,” I said simply. “But it seems that we’re once again in disagreement about the nature of the humans’ world. The prophecy says my child will be a great leader of men. Uniter of all humans on Earth.”

“And he will lead those men to their own destruction,” Michael snapped. “Don’t quote our own prophecies at me just to ignore the most important part. That child will burn the entire Earth to ash and dust by the time he’s grown.”

“Forests burn all the time.” I couldn’t shrug. I didn’t have the range of motion for it in my current state, nor the energy to try. “It turns the soil rich, destroys the things that are old and rotten and need to be set aflame. And in the wake of those flames, new growth springs up from beneath the charred earth.”

“You’re talking nonsense, Lucifer.” Michael’s lips curled with scorn.

“I’m talking nature, Michael.” I shook my head. The pain I’d been overwhelmed by mere moments ago was quickly being replaced with a barely contained fury all my own. “The humans are just as resilient as that jungle coming to life out of the Sahara’s sands. If the world burns, maybe the world needs to burn. And from its ashes, a new era will be reborn. One of peace and prosperity and goodwill between men. Full knowledge and free will for all.”

“The humans don’t need free will!” Michael’s voice boomed out and echoed around the room loudly enough to make the walls shake. “I can’t believe that after all this time, you’re still as naive as you were the day you fell.”

“You’re the one who said it.” I smirked at him. “I never learn.”

“The humans don’t even *want* free will. Let alone need it,” said Gabriel.

“What they want is guidance. Someone to reassure them that they’re on the right paths,” Michael said, nodding to Gabe in agreement. “What they need is faith. Structure. Ways to ensure the avoidance of sin.”

“Maybe that’s your problem, Michael.” I chuckled, energized by the fact that I knew I was getting to him. “You’ve been avoiding sin too successfully. Bet you’d be less stressed all the time if you could just get laid.”

His hand raised so quickly, I wondered if he’d even realized he’d hit me by the time his fist crashed against my nose.

That hurt, too. Not as badly as any of the nails had, but enough.

I supposed I deserved that one, at least. Michael never had liked when I’d tried to play angel’s advocate.

“You’re an angel again now. Start acting like one.” Michael shook out his hand as he stood over me.

As blood pooled from my sinuses into the back of my throat, I spat it out on his shoes, relishing the fact that the punch looked like it’d hurt his knuckles almost as much as it’d hurt my nose.

“Not going to happen,” I told him. “I promised I’d come back to Heaven with you. I promised I’d reclaim my wings.” My smile was a smug one. Full of pain, yes. Full of delight in defiance as well. “But I never promised I’d obey.”

Michael stared at me for a long moment. Then, raising his fist with full intent this time, he hit me again.

This time, it hurt even less.

“We’ll see about that,” he growled at me. “Gabriel? Get the knives.”

I saw them both search my face for fear before Gabriel turned to fetch Michael new weapons.

I saw their disappointment when they didn’t find any, too.

I was a thousand leagues away from fear now.

In my mind, there was no room for it.

The only thing my thoughts had room for was her.

My Evie. I missed her like a hurricane missed land. Michael had been right. If he hadn’t nailed my palms and feet to his cross, I would have gone to her in an instant when I learned she was with child.

Now, more than ever, I yearned to rip those nails from my hands so I could fold her into my arms again.

I should have thanked Michael for nailing me down, though. Going to her now would only put her in danger. I’d promised that I would come here. I’d promised that I would stay.

In exchange for never seeing her again, I hadn’t just assured Evie’s safety.

I’d guaranteed the safety of our child as well.

I knew damn well why Michael needed me to work with him so badly.

For as long as I kept up my end of the bargain, the only angel in all of Heaven who would be able to hurt Evie now was me.

My wife was safe. Our child would be born into a world that was safe for it to live in and grow.

And if that baby grew up into a conqueror who destroyed the Earth itself, so be it.

I’d meant what I said.

I truly believed a better world would rise up from the ashes in my son’s wake.

All this pain that my body held within it now?

It didn’t matter. It was nothing. I could cope.

Compared to what I'd gained today, it was a small price to pay.

EVIE

“So we’re really calling this stumpy little ball of fuzz *The Beast*, huh?” Joan sidestepped around The Beast as he trotted out of the elevator into Heresy with us, his little wet nose sniffing the floor with determination.

“Looks more like a Cupcake to me,” Bea agreed. “Or, I don’t know, Noodles?”

“How about Mr. Sprinkles?” Ava suggested.

“Absolutely not.” Legion looked at Ava like she’d just started saying a rosary. “It may look cute now, but that puppy is a bona fide hellhound. The Beast of the Earth. Scourge of the land, commander of sin, devourer of the holy—”

“Yeah, well, all he seems interested in devouring right now are my Jimmy Choos.” Gently, Bea nudged The Beast away from her heel, which it had taken into its mouth with sudden and intense interest. “Maybe that’s what we should call him. Jimmy.”

“I think *The Beast* might’ve already stuck, unfortunately,” I said with a sigh. “Maybe he’ll grow into it.”

I was dressed in something far comfier than my royal regalia now that Charon had brought us back to the Inferno from the pits of Hell. At least I could chalk *riding through Hell in a limousine* off my bucket list, I guessed.

If Mal, Don and Lock were as serious about helping me get Luke back as I thought they were, pretty soon I’d be able to check off *planning a heist of Heaven while wearing sweatpants* too.

My make-up from the meeting in the throne room was still on my face. Dark eyeliner, deep red lips. But my hair was piled up into a high, messy bun. I'd traded my heels for a pair of comfy running shoes. Over the sweatpants, I wore one of Luke's t-shirts. It said *Joy Division, Love Will Tear Us Apart*.

I'd never seen him wear it, but somehow, it still smelled like him.

I glanced at Legion as she led us to a table in the midst of all the writers and poets who came to the sixth floor to read and write and drink. "Is The Beast at least housebroken?"

"Probably." Legion shrugged as she pulled out a chair and waved me into it. "If he's not, it's hardly *your* problem, though. You're a queen now, remember? You have minions you can order to scoop the poop."

Ava snorted at Legion's phrasing. If I wasn't still feeling so off-kilter, I might have as well.

I didn't know what all the demons of Hell busied themselves with here, but trying to imagine an army of tall, dark and horrible creatures tasked with cleaning up after a corgi puppy was almost enough to make me smile.

Almost.

"So, tell us, *Your Majesty*, what are we drinking this morning?" Legion said as I lowered myself into the chair she'd chosen for me. "Dirty martinis? Margaritas? Champagne?"

"I'm pregnant, Leigh." I glanced over my shoulder at her. Did the women of Hell really drink while pregnant? I guessed misbehavior was technically on trend here—it wouldn't be Hell otherwise—but I couldn't help but balk at the idea anyway. "I don't think I'm even supposed to be drinking caffeine anymore."

"You've also been through some serious shit over the last few days," Legion countered. "And there are no repercussions for things like that here. Remember, you're Infernal now, too? You can eat all the sushi, guzzle all the coffee, and clean all the litter boxes you like. You're essentially bulletproof—as long as the bullets aren't made from blessed iron, of course—and so is that little life in your womb. A stiff drink won't hurt either of you. And given, well, everything." Legion waved vaguely, which just about summed it up. "You probably need one, too."

It was tempting, I had to admit—but so was everything in the Inferno. But as nice as it would be to drink away my pain, my stomach rebelled at

the idea of dumping alcohol into it. Just thinking about booze made me feel a little nauseated.

"I think I'd rather keep a clear head right now." I forced a smile as I glanced over my shoulder at her. "Maybe just...I don't know, some orange juice?"

"Whatever you say. You *are* the queen, I suppose." Legion headed off to the bar while Joan, Ava and Bea took seats at the table.

As for The Beast, he settled his furry little behind on my feet, curled up, and closed his eyes for a nap.

"So..." Bea glanced between Joan and Ava, then gave me a tense smile. "Pregnant, huh?"

"Looks like." I tried to return the smile, but it was hard to.

I'd never imagined myself as an expecting mother before. Pregnancy seemed like something that was supposed to happen to a future Evie. One who had her shit together and her husband back. Processing the reality of my new condition felt like trying to grab hold of water. My emotions were an aquarium of disaster churning inside me, threatening to break loose if I so much as tapped on the glass.

"Did you and Luke plan that?" Ava asked.

"I thought I was on birth control." I moved my hand to my arm and ran my fingers over the place where my implant had once been. Disappeared now—just like Phlegyas. "If Luke would have told me about what he planned to do at the coronation, maybe we could have talked about it first... but he didn't."

"He didn't tell you?" Ava's eyes widened with shock. "Why wouldn't he have warned you? That's... kind of fucked up."

"Very," Joan and Bea agreed.

I looked down at The Beast, who'd started to snore gently on top of my shoes.

"I knew something was wrong," I admitted. "He told me he would explain everything once the coronation was over."

And technically, he had. Luke hadn't lied to me, exactly—just omitted the fact that we'd only have a few hours together before he had to leave me forever. I missed him enough, I was trying not to dwell on that.

"I'd be pissed," Bea said with a shrug. "I'm surprised you're not."

"I think he didn't tell me for a reason." It hurt to admit that part, but I knew how much Luke loved me. He'd shown me so many times. He'd

made a point of telling me so every single day. And within that love, I knew he wouldn't have hurt me if he hadn't needed to. "I think he knew that if he told me, I'd try to stop him."

And he would've been right.

I understood the gravity of the sacrifice he'd made to keep me safe. I was living it.

But was my safety really worth an eternity without him?

The baby in my belly was the answer to that. Without it, I would have happily died and been reincarnated all over again. But it wasn't just my safety I had to worry about anymore.

"So, it was a happy accident, then," Joan said. She raised an eyebrow. "I mean... you *are* happy, right?"

I sighed. "If he hadn't sacrificed himself for me... if he was still here..." God. It was almost too good to even be able to imagine. "Honestly? I think I'd be ecstatic. I'd spend the next nine months looking at as many paint colors and bassinets for the nursery as Mulciber liked. But as things are now..."

"You miss him," said Ava.

I nodded. "I do."

"It's more than that though, isn't it?" Bea placed her hand over mine on top of the table and gave my fingers a squeeze. "Your marriage happened so fast, and we knew you had to get hitched to him to keep you safe from the angels... But it wasn't just for safety in the end, was it? You love him. You really do."

"Yeah, I do." My brow knitted as I recalled all the times I'd tried to tell him as much. All the times I'd failed. "I just wish I would have had the chance to tell him so before he left."

The girls all stared at me for a long moment. Sadness sank into their faces as my gaze met each of theirs.

"I'm so sorry, Eves." Ava spoke first. There were tears in her eyes all over again.

"That's not fair," Bea agreed.

"It's not fucking *right*," Joan growled.

"Orange juice with no vodka?" Legion returned to the table with a tray full of frosted glasses. "I know. It's a damn shame, but what the queen wants..."

“No,” I explained as Legion handed me an ice-cold glass of OJ. “We’re talking about Luke. I... I didn’t manage to tell him that I loved him before we left. I had time to, but I was...” I rolled my lips between my teeth, trying to bite back the feeling of shame that was filling my head all over again. “I was too busy trying to order him to stay. Now, he’ll never know.”

Legion gave me a look of annoyance as she took a seat. “Oh, please. You can’t really be that dumb.”

I blinked, then lowered my eyes.

“I shouldn’t have been,” I agreed. “But I was.”

“No, not about that. Drink your orange juice and chin up, for fuck’s sake.” Legion rolled her eyes. “Luke knows you love him. Do you really think he was that oblivious?”

“But...” My mouth gaped open for a moment as I tried to find words to fill it. “I never told him. I tried to, but—”

“Evie, sweetheart, there are more ways to say *I love you* than just saying it.” Legion sipped her orange juice, blanched, then shook her head. “You stayed with him. You didn’t try to run away from him this time. You made him laugh. You made him happy. The two of you could hardly keep your hands off each other. You really think all the time you spent together meant nothing because you didn’t manage to put it into words? Ridiculous.”

I blinked again.

I supposed, in a way, she was right.

“I guess I just regret not saying it,” I said softly. “Whether he knew it was true or not.”

Across the table, Ava made a tiny noise of annoyance. Her face was fixed into a pout.

“You okay, Aves?” Joan asked, placing a hand against Ava’s back.

“I think I’m in love with Mal.” She looked rattled by the concept. It was actually a little adorable.

Bea laughed. “Yeah, no shit. You’ve been in love with him ever since you first met. You told him yet?”

“No. We’ve been... taking things slow.” Ava’s cheeks were suddenly bright pink. She wouldn’t meet any of our eyes. “We were kind of planning to... you know, do the nasty. After the coronation. Before everything went sideways, I mean.”

Very carefully, I swallowed down a laugh. “Do the nasty?”

“Oh, leave me alone. You know what I mean.” Ava’s brow knitted in frustration. “Go to... you know, fifth base.”

Legion arched a brow. “Anal?”

“No!” Ava slapped her hands over her mouth. “I mean... um, touch poles?”

“I think that’s just for gay dudes, Aves.” Joan patted Ava’s back sympathetically, but her face was twisted like she was trying not to laugh as well. “You’re talking about fucking, right?”

Ava sighed. “Yes. That.”

“Well, from the sounds of things, you’re right to wait.” Legion rolled her eyes again. “If you can’t say it, you certainly have no business doing it.”

“We’re happy for you though, Aves.” I gave her a small smile, even though I knew she couldn’t see it. She was currently busy hiding her face in her hands in pink-cheeked shame. “Really. I’m sorry that the drama spoiled your special night, but I think it’s really sweet that you’re taking things slow.”

“Hard to imagine a demon taking anything slow, but if it’s working for you—” Bea cut herself off abruptly as her eyes focused on something behind me.

Now, Ava wasn’t the only one blushing.

“What’s this about demons taking things slow?” Don slipped into the seat next to me with a smirk on his lips. “Good to see you again, Beatrice.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Bea crossed her arms over her chest and looked away.

“Everything all right, Don?” I looked between him and Bea. I knew that Bea wasn’t exactly as charmed by Don as Ava was by Mal. And unlike Joan and Lock, the two of them were hardly friends.

But that particular reaction of Bea’s seemed... a little much, given the circumstances.

“I’m not sure,” Don said slowly. His eyes hadn’t left Bea yet. “But maybe Beatrice has something to say.”

“Not a thing,” Bea said flippantly.

“Oh, fucking hell.” Leigh knocked back the rest of her orange juice, scowling. “If the two of you won’t come out with it, someone has to.”

“Come out with what?” asked Joan.

“The two of them have been fucking for months now.” Legion waved her hand between Bea and Don. “And neither of them wants to admit it for

some stupid reason, even though it's so blatantly obvious it makes my teeth ache."

I looked between Bea, who looked more annoyed than ever, and Don, who looked smug.

"So... Don is the mysterious guy you've been casually seeing, then?" I asked. It honestly made sense in a lot of ways. "Wait—was Don the guy who stood you up that day you asked me for a ride back here from UCLA?"

"Yes," Bea grumbled, staring at the wall like she wanted to put the heel of one of her Jimmy Choos through it. "If you must know, it was."

"Didn't mean to, of course." Don gave Bea a wink, which only made her scowl harder. "But when Evie and Luke were attacked by those angel-touched humans... well, duty called."

"Sorry," I told Bea, wincing.

"It's fine. Really." Bea sighed. "I was only keeping it quiet because you all know how complicated my love life is. Perpetually. I didn't want to make it awkward when it came time to send out wedding announcements."

Bea reached into purse and pulled out a huge, honking engagement ring. There were enough massive diamonds on it, as she put it on her finger, I was surprised that her wrist didn't collapse under its weight.

As much as I wished that the ring had been Don's doing, I knew that was far from the case. Bea had been in an arranged engagement with the son of her father's business partner since approximately the time of her birth.

I guessed with Bea's master's degree wrapping up this summer, her family had finally decided to pull the trigger and make things official once and for all.

"I could still take care of that for you, you know," Don offered. There was something dark and murderous glimmering in his eyes. "Wouldn't even be hard."

"It's fine." Bea waved the offer away, but I could have sworn I caught a flicker of regret pass over her face as she did it. "Did you need something, Don, or are you just here in the hopes that I'll tell everyone how big your dick is?"

"Oh, you don't have to talk me up like that, darling." Don flashed his teeth at her. "Most people can tell that just by looking at me."

Bea gave him the finger, and Don laughed.

“*Did* you need something, Don?” As cute as it was to see them flirt—albeit in the weirdest way possible—the sadness that had flashed through Bea’s eyes had felt akin to my own.

She obviously cared about Don too, in her own way.

And just like I’d lost Luke, there was no way she could get out of her current engagement. Especially if her family was already planning the wedding invitations.

It seemed cruel to make her play out all of her emotions in front of everyone like this.

“I do, actually,” Don admitted. “You want to rescue Luke from the angels. Correct?”

“More than anything.” I nodded, turning toward him. “And you all think it can be done?”

“It might be messy. We’ll need a good distraction, which I think Mal and I can provide. And we don’t expect that Luke will exactly be... in the best health when we do get to him.” Don sighed. “His war with Heaven is full of old wounds. The angels will almost certainly want repayment for that.”

I bit my lip, then nodded again. “I don’t expect anything less. What else do you need? What can I do to help?”

“Well...” Don gave me a sad, tense smile. “How bad is your morning sickness, Evie? Are you feeling up for coming along with us?”

“Of course,” I said immediately. “The morning sickness I can manage. It shouldn’t be a problem at all.”

Honestly, I was surprised that Don had even asked. I’d just assumed that I would be part of the rescue team.

“It will be dangerous,” Don warned me. “For you, and possibly for the baby as well. If you have even the smallest shred of hesitation...”

“Oh.” I placed my hand over the base of my stomach. I was still getting used to this pregnancy thing. I’d only just found out this morning. “The baby... I hadn’t thought about that.”

Idiot. This baby was the last thing that Luke had left for me.

If we failed, the child that Luke and I had made together would be all I’d ever have of him at all.

“If all goes as planned, there’s nothing to worry about,” Don assured me. “We wouldn’t be inviting you along at all if it wasn’t necessary. But unfortunately, it is.”

“How do you mean?” I asked. I’d honed my swordsmanship skills in preparation for the coronation. I had more control over the flames I could make with my hands than I’d ever had before. But Don and Mal and Lock were all battle-hardened warriors, and I was just...

Me.

“You’re Luke’s anchor,” Don explained. “The bond between husband and wife is the most powerful thing in all the worlds... save for, maybe, the bond between parents and children.”

Don nodded to the hand I still held over my belly. Beneath it, I felt flame flicker at his acknowledgment of it.

“To break the bonds that Luke has made to Heaven, you’ll need something with that kind of power,” Legion agreed. “Don’s right. If you want to bring Luke back, the best chance is if you go get him yourself.”

“I’ll burn in Heaven now though, won’t I?” I moved my thumb over my belly, doing my best to comfort that warmth I felt within it. “Will it hurt the baby too?”

“It’s too small. Still innocent,” Don assured me. “But, yes, it will hurt you.”

“That’s fine,” I said immediately. “Is that all?”

“Not quite.” Don sighed with regret. “I need you to understand that the angels will have a vested interest in that child. They’ll do their damndest to ensure that Luke isn’t lost to them as-is. If they realize you’re pregnant—assuming they already haven’t—then they’ll stop at nothing to make sure you’re not able to leave either.”

“Then we won’t let that happen.” I shrugged. “Simple as that.”

“No,” Don agreed. “We won’t. You don’t have a choice about that, Evie. If this goes badly—if you’re at risk of being taken by them—Lock, Mal and I have already agreed. We’d rather die in Heaven than see you fall into the angels’ clutches. This is nonnegotiable. If it comes down to a matter of us, or you—you choose yourself. Can you handle that?”

I pursed my lips, feeling tears in my eyes all over again.

“Do I really have a choice?”

Don’s sad smile returned. “No. You don’t.”

“Thank you,” I whispered. “I hope you know how much that means to me.”

“We’re not doing it out of charity,” Don said. “We want Luke back too. No matter the stakes.”

“When do we leave, then?” If today had been any other day, I would have needed to spend it frantically working on my thesis to make up for lost time. But given that my adviser had just turned out to be an angel hell-bent on making me his own—and that he had been taken away to Heaven as well—my schedule was suddenly looking emptier than it had ever been.

“Tonight,” said Don. “You know that we’re loyal to you. The other Fallen, though... we can’t risk waiting. They have their own motivations and desires. Luke never wanted war between Heaven and Hell. The others, left to their own devices and with enough time to plan in Luke’s absence... well, we don’t need them getting any ideas about finishing off old grudges once and for all.”

“Good.” Tonight was fine by me.

“We’re coming too,” Joan piped up, raising her glass of orange juice like a Viking princess making a toast. “You’ll need all the firepower you can get, from the sounds of things.”

“No,” Don, Legion and I all said at the same time.

“What?” Bea looked furious all over again.

“We want to help, though!” Ava insisted.

“This isn’t your battle,” I told them. “Don and Mal and Lock are all infernal. Now, so am I. But you’re all still...” I sighed. The status of our mortalities had already dug a palpable ditch between us. One that we’d all been avoiding discussing. I didn’t want to dig it any deeper. “You’re human. All three of you.”

“And as humans in Heaven, you’d be most at risk.” Don shook his head. “You three will all stay here with Legion to protect you.”

Joan looked to Legion immediately, glass still in hand. “In that case, I’d like some vodka in this now.”

Legion smirked and pointed her finger at Joan’s drink. The level of the liquid immediately paled and raised by an inch. “Thought you’d never ask.”

“Luke will still be an angel when we rescue him though, right?” I turned back to Don, ready to smooth out the rest of our plans. “We can’t bring him back to Hell. He’ll burn here.”

I’d seen that firsthand when we’d said our goodbyes.

“We’ll need a safe place on Earth where we can take him to heal whatever wounds the angels have inflicted,” said Don. “Here in Vegas,

preferably. The angels are likely to retaliate when they realize he's gone. If they're going to, we should make sure it's on our own turf."

"Can you ask Charon to book a suite for us at the Bellagio?" I asked Legion.

The Bellagio. Luke had asked me to marry him out in front of it, near the fountains. If we couldn't come back to the Inferno, it seemed like as good of a place as any.

"Of course," Legion said. "Consider it done."

"That just leaves an entry point." I turned back to Don. "How do four demons get into Heaven?"

Don winced. "There's a way... but you're not going to like it."

I wasn't surprised.

There wasn't anything about this I liked, but if it meant getting Luke back, that didn't matter.

All that mattered was him.

EVIE

We arrived outside of Paradise through a portal Don opened from the Abyss. The club looked full tonight. Beneath the neon palm trees and pink cursive lettering of the sign over the building, tourists and bachelors flowed in like hard liquor poured over ice.

“Will they even let us in, dressed like this? I feel like the Unabomber in this sweatshirt.” I asked as I put on the sunglasses Luke had given me once. He’d joked that they’d once belonged to Elvis. Something that the King of Rock ‘n Roll had thrown in as part of a bargain for fame at a crossroads.

That first morning we’d spent together felt like an entire lifetime ago. I supposed I was.

“We need to keep a low profile,” Don said, pulling on a plain black baseball cap. In jeans and a dark t-shirt, I’d never seen him so dressed down.

“It’s called the Gray Man,” Mal explained in his light Southern drawl. In a navy-blue zip-up hoodie and sneakers instead of his usual cowboy boots, he looked just as out of character as Don did. “We’re wearing nondescript clothing to blend in. Don’t wanna attract any more attention than we already will.”

“You don’t think four people dressed like undercover feds are going to attract attention?” I cast a glance at a group of frat boys in salmon pink shorts and garish Hawaiian shirts. “This is Vegas, remember. We’d probably blend in more by standing out.”

“It’s no’ the crowd we’re trying tae blend in with tonight, lass.” Lock adjusted his own sunglasses, looking uncomfortable in his dark polo shirt. Normally, he looked every bit the proud Scottish warrior he was, but tonight he looked more like an accountant on a coke bender. “It’s the background we want to become. Besides.” He pulled on a windbreaker. “We need the long sleeves tae hide some of the smoke. You’re infernal too now, remember. When we go through those doors, ye should expect it to burn.”

I nodded, already bracing for it. “I’m ready, then. Let’s get this over with.”

The second we crossed over the threshold, I could feel the shift in reality. It really did feel like passing into a different realm. But while I could see Don, Mal and Lock all tense with discomfort, I was surprised to find I didn’t feel anything burning on my own skin.

I was a little warmer than usual, sure. But given how packed Paradise was tonight, it could have easily just been the heat of all the bodies grinding against each other amongst the gaggles of beautiful, winged angels who writhed to the beat of the music on the dance floor.

Maybe I wasn’t quite as infernal as everyone thought.

“We need tae work fast,” Lock murmured under his breath. He pointed to a hallway at the back of the club. “Down that way. Quick, before we’re seen.”

I grimaced. I’d been down that hallway before.

I hadn’t liked what I’d found at the end of it: my ex-fiancé, Adam, having an orgy with angelic beings on the night before I was supposed to become his bride.

Then again, that whole situation had turned out for the best in the end. Adam had always been wrong for me. It had taken that infidelity before I could finally see it.

Adam’s betrayal had led directly to my marriage to Luke.

Now, it was the man who was undeniably right for me that I needed to find at the end of that hall.

“They’ll be keeping him in one of the holding cells, I reckon,” Mal explained under his breath as our group moved through the crowd. “You should prepare yourself for it. He’s probably gonna be pretty roughed up.”

“I know.” I’d already come to that conclusion independently. Luke had been the enemies of the angels since nearly the beginning of time. Now

that they had him right where they wanted him, I wouldn't be surprised that they'd made him pay for all that he'd done. "Why are there holding cells in Heaven at all, though? If this is paradise, that's a little off-brand, don't you think?"

"It's where they try to save sinners," Don replied. He kept his head low and stuck close to my side. "They don't want humans in Hell any more than they want demons there."

"Then why did they create Hell to begin with, if they want it empty?" I still struggled to wrap my head around the cosmic conflict that my life had turn into. No matter how hard I tried, it never felt as cut and dry as I would have liked.

"They didn't, lass. When Heaven was created, Hell sprung up as well," said Lock. "As above, so below. But if they can empty Hell, they figure they won't have any more opposition on Earth. They'll be free to bend as many people to their will as they like."

"As above, so below..." I repeated Lock's words in a whisper. "If that's true, emptying Hell would empty Heaven, too."

"Now you're getting it." Don nodded in approval. "They're working on flawed logic. They have been for some time now."

"Who flawed it?" By now, I was getting used to the idea that everything I knew about angels was incorrect. I'd been raised to believe they were perfect beings of protection. It seemed like at some point something had gone wrong.

But what? When?

"We're as curious as you are," said Mal. "If we knew, we probably wouldn't be here tonight at all."

We made it to the mouth of the hallway safely. Smoke was rolling out from beneath the cuffs of the boys' jackets and sweatshirts now, but so far, no one seemed to have noticed.

Good. The cleaner we entered into this situation, the easier it would be to get back out—this time, with Luke at our side, safe and sound.

"All right, lads." Lock clapped his hands on Don and Mal's shoulders. "Are ye ready for a wee rumble?"

As I looked between them through my Elvis glasses, I noticed a dark aura that surrounded each of them. A glance back at the dance floor revealed that all of the winged dancers had a similar glow around their bodies, only theirs was bright and white.

I took my glasses off and looked at the boys again. Their auras were gone now. Maybe the glasses were smudged?

Or maybe, I thought as I cleaned the glasses on the edge of my sweatshirt, they were a little more than just Elvis sunglasses. It wasn't the first time I'd noticed the auras through them, but this was the first time I'd ever been presented with so much proof all at once.

Mal and Don nodded to each other and began rolling up their sleeves. More smoke poured off their bodies as they grinned and squared up to each other.

"Nothing below the belt buckle, you dumb hick," Don said to Mal with a smirk.

"Right, and you keep your hands off my wallet, city slicker." Mal chuckled, then formed his hands into fists. "Let's tussle."

Lock put an arm around my back and swept me down the hall as Mal and Don began to swing at each other. They looked like they were having the times of their lives, but a glance over my shoulder confirmed that Paradise's security was immediately concerned. Angels in white suits emerged from the edges of the room and began to make their way toward Don and Mal through the crowd.

"They're going to be all right, aren't they?" I asked as Lock and I left them behind. "I feel bad that they're having to beat the snot out of each other so we can get away unnoticed."

"Those two?" Lock laughed. "Aye. They're brothers, the two of them. This is far from the first time they've fought for a laugh—and most likely, it's far from the last, too."

"Brothers? Really?" Behind us, shouts and the sound of breaking glass began to build as the energy from Don and Mal's fight spread to the rest of the crowd. "I didn't realize demons had family, I guess."

"Half-brothers, technically, but aye." Lock nodded. "They share a mother. Did ye really not ken they were the bairns of Belial?"

I snorted as we moved down the hall. It turned sharply at one point and the lights got even darker.

I supposed it made sense, now that Lock mentioned it. Don and Mal weren't part of Luke's Fallen, but they'd always been in his circle of trust. As sons of a fallen angel, it explained where they'd gotten so much power from.

“Poor Bea and Ava.” I didn’t envy them for the fallout that was probably going to come when Belial realized her sons were shacking up with humans. But I imagined if you asked the two of them, it probably explained where Don and Mal had gotten some of their sexual charisma as well.

“Ach. They’ll be all right, I’m sure.” Lock smirked. “It’s your Joanie I’m more concerned about. Is she single, do ye ken?”

I looked up at him, bemused. “Is this really the time, Lock?”

“No, perhaps not.” Lock shrugged as he paused to study one of the doors in this darker stretch of hallway, then shook his head and kept moving. “But I fancy her somethin’ fierce, and this is the first I’ve been able to ask ye about it without her bein’ there as well.”

“Have the two of you, ah...” I didn’t usually pry into Joan’s sex life, which she tended to keep to herself, but I supposed before I answered any of Lock’s questions about her, it was worth knowing how serious things were.

“Had a houghmagandie?” Lock guessed. “Lain together?”

“Yes. That.”

“Oh, aye. A time or two. All that sparrin’ together, ye ken. Gets the blood up, then one thing leads to another...”

“Right.” So all my friends had been engaging in secret trysts with the men of Hell. My mouth twitched with a smile. That made a lot of sense, now that it was all out in the open. “Well, in that case, you should probably ask her if she’s single yourself.”

“Psssh. She’d box my ears in for even bringin’ it up.” Lock rubbed the back of his neck, studied another door, then scoffed. “Difficult lass to pin down, your Joanie. Course, once ye do...”

I held up a hand before Lock could reveal anything more. “*Lock.*”

“Right.” Lock’s cheeks bloomed into a gentle pink flush as he grinned. “I’m gonna do a quick scan of the rest of these doors. You stay here and keep an eye out for angels. Fair enough?”

I nodded to him, relieved that I didn’t have to hear any more sex confessions. Joan would’ve hated him just for revealing what he already had.

“Fair enough.”

Lock headed down the hall with purpose, touching his palm to each door he passed and shaking his head in disappointment as he failed to

sense Luke behind them.

I looked back toward the way we'd come from, checking quickly for anyone who might disturb our search, and didn't find anyone.

For a moment, I closed my eyes and tried to seek Luke out as well.

My heart beat a little faster once my eyes were closed. At first, I thought it was anticipation, but then, as I'd hoped...

I felt him. I did. I couldn't tell where he exactly he was, only that he was close. I felt it in my belly, wound up in the tightness that had formed in my womb.

I felt it in my chest, too. A warmth and a light that I'd only known when Luke's lips had been pressed against mine.

It was enough to give me more hope than I'd felt in weeks.

Unless we failed tonight, in which case, it was enough to break my heart, too.

A throat cleared in front of me, and my eyes shot open again, expecting Lock.

Instead, I found myself staring down...

Myself.

What?

I blinked as I took in the sight of my own face. Those were my gray eyes staring back at me. My full lips, painted an ugly pink color that I knew better than to try and pull off. My thick blonde waves. My stupid nose.

But it wasn't my reflection.

A grayish aura surrounded her. Not white, not dark. Something strange in between.

It wasn't *me*.

"Ew," the other Evie said, sneering and stepping back. She was wearing high, strappy heels and a pink dress so tiny, I'd seen napkins with more fabric to them. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Huh?" There was a man at the other Evie's side. His arm was draped around her shoulders. He smelled like sugary-sweet booze. As he looked between us, his brow furrowed in confusion. "What the... You look familiar somehow..."

I took a step back, more stunned than ever.

It was Adam. My ex. The man who'd cheated on me, broken my heart and unwittingly put all of this in motion.

Which made the other Evie...

His wife. His *new* wife.

Up close like this, she looked even more like me than she had when the girls had shown me the wedding pictures on Adam's Instagram.

But as I'd suspected at the time, there was something not quite right about her. My Elvis glasses all but confirmed it.

Whatever she was, she wasn't angelic. She wasn't infernal.

In fact, I was beginning to suspect she wasn't even human.

"Move," said the other Evie. "You're in our way."

I tried to remember what this version of me was calling herself as she shoved me aside. Evangelina, maybe? Eva? I couldn't recall.

Whatever her name was, she certainly seemed eager to get Adam away from me. Not that I minded.

I would have been perfectly happy to never see his face again after what he'd done.

But Adam lingered behind, even as his new wife tried to drag him away.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" he asked me.

I had to try hard not to laugh.

We'd been engaged once. I looked exactly like his new wife.

Had he really forgotten about me? I'd be glad if so.

Or maybe, some kind of curse—or blessing—was preventing him from recognizing my face.

"No," I said, at the same time the other Evie said, "Not a chance."

"Huh. Are you sure?" Adam reached for my glasses, but before he could grab them, I took a big step backward and the other Evie pulled him away.

The tension that had formed in my shoulders eased as I watched them both walk away.

Whatever was going on *there*, I wanted absolutely no part in it. I was glad the other Evie seemed to agree.

She had her man now, and I had no intention of trying to take Adam away from her.

All I wanted was to get my man back, too.

"Evie! Found him!" Lock's voice called out from the other end of the hall. "Come quick. It's... ah, shite. It's bad. I'll need your help."

I gave one last glance to Adam and Other-Evie as they disappeared around the corner. Other-Evie turned as well, meeting my eyes. She looked around the corner for me, glanced back, and gave me a small thumbs-up.

Go. Her lips shaped the word soundlessly.

Wow. She really *was* eager to keep me away from Adam. But if I could trust her—I hoped I could—it was good news.

There weren't any other angels coming our way.

We were safe. For now.

I turned to the sound of Lock's voice and broke into a run. I found him snarling at a door at the end of the hall. His body was smoking more than ever. I knew he must be in pain.

Once again, I wondered why my skin wasn't smoking too—but that was something we'd have to deal with later.

"What's wrong?" I asked, placing a hand on Lock's shoulder. I had to draw it away quickly, though. Even his clothing was searing hot to the touch.

"I can see him behind the door," Lock panted. He took a few steps back and cracked his neck. "They've crucified him. Hurt him badly, too. Told him he should've never given the rat bastards those bloody nails."

As the image of Luke nailed to a cross filled my mind, it felt like a nail had been driven into my heart as well.

"How do we get in?" I asked, my voice full of urgency.

"Only way I've ever gotten into anything," Lock growled. "I'm battering the fuckin' door down."

Lock ran at the door and slammed against it with all his strength. When it failed to yield to him, he staggered back, took a breath, then did it again.

And again.

And again.

The skin on Lock's cheeks was beginning to smolder. Little embers were burning holes through his jacket where more smoke could pour out.

He was in pain. He was doing his best to hide it, but I could see it.

And every time he rushed the door, it was getting worse.

"Stop," I ordered him. "Let me try something."

"I'm no lettin' ye yerself, lass," Lock said with a shake of his head. "If this door won't break down for me, I don't see what help yer wee body would be—no offense."

“None taken,” I said as I moved between Lock and the door. “But I’m not going to try to break it down.”

“No? Then what?”

“I’m going to ask it to open for me.” It almost felt stupid to say it out loud, but it didn’t matter.

If Lock’s brutality wasn’t going to do the trick, maybe it required something else.

I wasn’t burning here. There was no telling why, but I was beginning to suspect that I had some kind of protection that the others didn’t.

I didn’t know who it came from. Maybe from within me. Maybe from above.

But the golden light that had glimmered around Luke and me when we’d kissed after saying our vows had felt like love. And as I tried to imagine holding Luke in my arms again, I felt that golden light return. It rippled through my chest and reverberated through my soul.

Something more powerful than angels and demons had smiled on Luke and me that night. It had wanted us to be together.

It had felt like love.

Maybe it was here with us now.

Maybe it would bring Luke back to me again.

I pressed my hand against the door. It had no handle. No lock to pick or force or break.

I rested my forehead against its smooth surface and thought of Luke. His scent, dark and earthy and rich. His kisses, always so fiery and passionate that they left my mouth warm long after he’d finally pulled away again.

I thought of the little life he’d placed in my womb. The future I’d imagined for us together. Husband and wife—and now, child as well.

Open for me, I begged the door and the light alike. *I want my husband back.*

And then, just like that, the door swung inward.

And behind it, as Lock had said—

There he was.

My Lucifer. My husband.

My Luke.

“Fuck,” I swore as I took him in. His head hung low, unconscious. His shoulders slumped forward beneath his weight. His arms were stretched

across a dark, rough length of wood. Pearly blood dripped from the nails in his hands. More trickled down his bare feet—and from his chest, too, which looked like it had been cut with knives and stabbed with thorns.

I rushed to him, placing my hands against his cheeks. His skin burned, flushed and feverish beneath my palms.

“Luke.” I tried to make his eyes meet mine, but his lashes barely fluttered at the sound of my voice. “Luke, it’s Evie. It’s me.”

“The nails, lass.” Lock came in behind me and dropped to his knees as he reached for the one that pinned down Luke’s feet. “They’ve left him weak. We’ll need to get them out—then we need to get going. Mal and Don have the angels distracted for now, but that won’t last.”

I placed a kiss on Luke’s forehead, then moved to the nail in his left hand. It was buried deep, but as I twisted its head, I was pretty sure I could pull it out.

It took all of my strength, but finally, something gave way. Luke groaned in a quiet agony as the length of iron passed back through his skin.

“Evie?” He struggled to lift his head, but for a brief moment, his eyes opened and met mine. “Is it... is that really you?”

“Of course it is, you gorgeous asshole.” I handed the nail to Lock then moved to the other. “Who else would it be?”

“A trick.” Luke hissed, his face contorting with pain as Lock yanked the nail from his feet. Through that pain, Luke’s eyes sought mine again. “If you’re a trick, though... you’re a damn beautiful one, love.”

“I’m not a trick,” I assured him. “I’m your fucking wife.”

Luke slumped forward as I removed the last nail. Lock shifted up to catch him before he fell.

“If you’re my wife,” Luke mumbled, looking dazed, “then you’ll do me a favor, won’t you?”

I stared down at him, not sure whether to scowl at him or smile.

We’d only just rescued him, and he was already asking for favors?

He might not have been sure that I was me, but I was *certainly* sure that this was him.

No other man would have had the balls.

“What do you want, you silly man?”

Luke smirked, eyes only half open. He looked like he was struggling to stay conscious, but when his blues met mine, glinting with that wickedness

I loved so much, suddenly I knew everything was going to be all right.

“Kiss me, love,” Luke whispered.

I couldn't help but laugh.

“Don't die on me before we get you out of this place,” I told him, raising a hand to his cheek. “And you can have as many kisses as you want.”

EVIE

“**Y**ou smell good,” Luke slurred in my ear as Lock and I hauled him back down the hall.

I’d never seen Luke drunk before. I supposed he still wasn’t now—just in enough pain that he seemed like he was.

If he hadn’t been shirtless, bleeding, half-dead and barely held up between my body and Lock’s, it might have even been kind of cute.

“Save it, handsome.” As much as I would have liked to entertain his compliments, this really wasn’t the time.

“Like the fucking ocean, love,” Luke mumbled anyway, disregarding my advice entirely. “That’s you. My Evie-ocean.”

“Ah, piss,” Lock swore. “Did they bash ye in the head too hard, ye old bastard? Talk sense or shut yer trap.”

“S’not brain damage,” Luke assured us through a dopey smile. “Just love.”

“Ugh.” Lock’s derision toward Luke was fond, but barely contained. “With you, what’s the difference ever been? No offense meant to ye, lass.”

“None taken.” If only I could have chalked Luke’s sacrifice up to brain damage.

Lock was right, though. It had been love and I knew it—but the two things didn’t always seem so different when you got right down to it.

Especially where Luke was involved.

Fuck. I really did love him.

I wouldn’t have had it any other way.

“Sounds like the fight’s still roaring on,” Lock said with a nod up ahead as we rounded the corner. His cheeks were hollowed out into embers now. I could tell from the knit in his brow that it hurt.

There was only a small stretch of hall left to go before we were back out on the dance floor of Paradise.

If we were quick, and quiet, and clever about things, maybe Mal and Don’s violent distraction would be enough.

But as soon as we stepped back out into the club, I realized what a silly hope that had been.

Nothing about our lives had ever been that easy before.

Of course it wasn’t enough.

On the dance floor, angels were battling bachelor parties while the DJ played “Dancing Queen.” An elderly tourist in a fanny pack had one of the beautiful seraphim exotic dancers by her long, blonde ponytail. The seraphim’s wings flapped frantically as she tried to shake herself free.

Two of the club’s security agents were desperately trying to pin down a furious-looking bride-to-be wielding a broken bottle of Grey Goose while her bridesmaids, who wore tank-tops that said, “We’re What Happens In Vegas,” gnawed at the angels’ ankles and beat them with stiletto heels.

A man stumbled backward toward us, swearing and engulfed in a cloud of smoke. He turned to us, already swinging his fist with a punch at ready.

His knuckles stopped mere inches away from Lock’s face.

“Oh,” Don said with a laugh of relief when he realized who he’d been swinging for. His nose was bloody and already beginning to swell. One side of his sunglasses hung dangerously off one of his ears. The other half of them were nowhere to be found. “Good. It’s you.”

“You and Mal did this?” I nodded to the violence playing out on the dance floor beyond us.

“We sure did.” Don smiled, pleased with himself. “Nothing like a couple of fighting demons to stir up trouble in Paradise.”

“And where is the lad?” Lock asked, scanning the churning crowd. “We need to get out of here before the angels set the place right again.”

“Fist-fighting a bachelor party, last I saw.” Don squinted as he searched the crowd as well. “To be fair, they deserved it. They were getting handsy with the dancers when we walked in, anyway.”

“Grab him and let’s go.” I looked for the exit that the bartender had shown us to the last time we’d been here. It was all the way across the

room, but I was pretty sure we could make it there if Don and Mal didn't mind throwing a few more punches on the way.

Don nodded. "You all go on. I'll get him and meet you outside." He paused before he turned to clap Luke on the shoulder. "Good have you back, Dawnstar."

Luke gave Don another dopey grin in return, along with a weak thumbs-up. "I'll be here all week."

"No, you won't be." I looked to Lock. "Can you carry him? I'm afraid his knees are going to go out any second now."

"Aye. But it won't feel nice."

"I'm not sure that's something we can avoid right now," I pointed out.

"Got me there, lass." Lock dropped a shoulder and took Luke across his back in a fireman's carry. If it hurt Luke, he didn't make any mention of it.

"Pretty eyes," Luke said to me through a lopsided smile. He reached out to stroke my cheek and missed it by about a foot.

Ugh.

No man had any right to be this cute while in this much pain.

Least of all a man who already looked like Luke.

Lock and I fell into step with each other as we headed for the exit. If Don could recover Mal and they could make their way out unharmed—or, at least, without any significant stab wound from that bottle of Grey Goose that bride was swinging around—we could chalk this up to a completely successful rescue mission.

I was already imagining how nice it would be to get Luke into our bed at the suite in the Bellagio—at least, until a figure stepped in front of us again.

"I know you." Adam's brow was furrowed in frustrated confusion as he blocked our path. He reached out to me, trying to take my hand. "I know I do. Why I don't I remember? Tell me who you are."

"Oi. Step off, lad." Lock pressed a hand against Adam's chest and pushed him away from me as I took a step back. "Ye don't ken her. Go bother someone else."

I didn't want Adam to touch my hand. Not only because I never wanted any part of him to ever touch any part of me again after what he'd done...

But I was worried, too.

Whatever had made Adam forget me was a blessing for us both, as far as I was concerned.

A blessing I was afraid would be broken if he ever touched me again.

Lock's shove only made Adam's frown deepen, though. There was anger in his eyes now.

That was an unfortunate thing. For him. Even with Luke slung across his shoulders, Lock had a good five inches on my ex and a warrior's physique to boot. Adam, on the other hand, had always had a deep aversion to the gym. I'd once seen him nearly knock himself out playing a test-your-strength punching game in a dive bar. When we'd lived together and he couldn't get a jar open, *he* had always handed it to *me*.

But I could tell from the look on Adam's face that none of this was registering to him right now. He was being affected by the demon battle mojo that Don and Mal had infected the club with. That much was obvious.

Either that, or he really just didn't know how to pick his battles.

"I'll bother whoever I like," Adam insisted, puffing up his chest and forming a fist with his hand.

My eyes darted to the door. It was so close, I could almost taste freedom.

But if Lock ended up fighting Adam, Luke might end up hurt in the process. And with Don and Mal lost in the crowd...

All that left was me.

"Fuck off," I told him, stepping in front of Lock. "I don't know you, and you don't know me. If you want to pick fights, you need to look elsewhere."

"I *do* know you," Adam insisted. He didn't uncurl his fist, but his eyes were suddenly pleading. "Tell me why. Tell me your name."

"Move," I told him. "Or I'll move you myself."

"Evie..." Lock warned—but it was already too late.

Adam's lips pulled back in a snarl as he grabbed my shoulder. I pulled it out of his grasp as quickly as I could—but it just wasn't quick enough.

His eyes widened with sudden recognition.

"What? ...Evie?" He looked more confused than ever now.

"Adam!" The other Evie rushed to Adam's side through the crowd. Her tiny dress had been torn at the skirt all the way up to her hip at some point

in the fight occurring around us. There was broken glass in her hair and a swollen split in her lower lip. “What are you doing?”

“Evie...” Adam looked between me and his new wife. “Evie?”

“You *bitch*,” Other-Evie snarled at me. There was hate in her eyes. Eyes that were exactly the same as mine. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” I promised her. “We’re only trying to leave.”

But as I saw a pair of white wings approaching us from out of the corner of my eye, I realized that Irish goodbye to Paradise was no longer in our cards.

It looked like Paradise’s guardian angels had finally managed to fight off those ankle-biting bridesmaids after all.

“*Fuck*,” one of the angels snarled, pointing at us. “They’re getting away!”

“I’ll get the adversary, you grab the Lilith,” the taller of the two angels barked at his companion.

The shorter angel blinked, then grabbed the taller angel’s wrist. “Er. Which one is the Lilith again?”

They looked between Other-Evie and me in mutual bemusement.

Incredible. They were as just as confused as Adam was.

“It’s her,” said Other-Evie, pointing at me and looking triumphant. “She’s the Lilith. I’m the Eve.”

Lock and I exchanged a sudden, panicked glance.

“I’m the Eve,” I blurted out. “She’s a liar. Adam...” It felt dirty to do it, but if we were going to get Luke out of here alive—if we were going to get out at *all*—I didn’t have a choice. I looked to my ex-fiancé with soft, heartbroken eyes. “Can’t you tell it’s me?”

“Wuh...” Adam scratched his head, dumbfounded. He looked at Other-Evie. He looked at me. “I... I don’t know. I’m not sure.”

“You don’t know who your own wife is?” the taller angel scoffed. “This is ridiculous. Let’s take them both just to be sure. The adversary’s injured, and he can’t return to Hell anyway.”

“The Lilith is the priority now,” the other agreed.

Nodding in unison, both angels began making their way to Other-Evie and me.

“Wait! No!” Adam stepped in front of me, shielding me with his body. He nodded to Other-Evie. “Take her. She’s the fake one. This one is real.”

“You *bastard!*” Other-Evie shrieked at Adam as the angels shrugged at each other and moved to grab her wrists.

“Go,” I whispered to Lock, pushing him toward the doors. “Before they realize their mistake.”

As we rushed for the exit, I glanced back at Adam. He didn’t seem to have noticed yet that we were slipping away behind his back.

I almost felt bad about it, but then again...

He *had* cheated on me in an angelic, coke-fueled orgy the night before we were supposed to be married. Here in this very club, no less.

As far as I was concerned, he owed me one.

I broke into a run and shoved the door of the exit open. I held it for Lock as he came through.

Out on the street, the tires of our limo screeched to a halt as Charon pulled up for us. We raced towards it. Halfway there, I heard the door open again. A glance over my shoulder revealed Don and Mal, both smoldering with blood on their faces, stumbling forward with their arms around each other’s shoulders. Both were laughing as they ran our way.

At least they looked like they’d had fun.

“You should really cut your hair, pretty thing.” Luke reached for my waves as Lock lowered his feet back onto the ground once more. Again, he missed. By a lot. “You know you never liked having it this long.”

I smiled at him as I opened the door for the limo. “We can talk about that later, handsome. Right now, I think we need to go.”

“You can say that again,” Don panted as he came up behind us. “The archangel just arrived.”

I looked to the skies. As I caught sight of a flutter of majestic wings, I knew it was true.

We’d more than worn out our welcome here.

If there was ever a time to hightail it out of this joint, it was now.

Don and Mal took Luke beneath his arms and dragged him into the backseat of the limo. Lock ushered me in behind them with a hand at my back, then crawled into the limo himself.

As soon as the door was closed, Charon hit the gas. Out the back window, I peered at the outside of Paradise just in time to see Michael touch down.

From the exit we’d escaped from, more angels were pouring out. For a moment, they looked like they intended to take flight and follow us—but

then, to my surprise, Michael held up a hand, stopping all of them in their tracks.

He was staring at the taillights of the limo. I knew he couldn't see inside through the tinted windows, but nonetheless, I couldn't help but feel like he was looking right at me.

There was something glittering in his gaze that unsettled me more than anything else ever could have.

We'd succeeded at our heist of Paradise. We'd rescued Luke. We'd gotten away with only a few minor injuries—none of my own.

By all accounts, we'd won.

But that look in Michael's eyes...

I couldn't shake the feeling that despite our victory, somehow, we'd still managed to lose.

LUKE

Good God, she was pretty.
Loveliest thing I'd ever known.

The pain was real. My entire body ached with it so badly, it was hardly even worth paying attention to anymore. At a certain point, agony had tipped over into acceptance. It was like that sometimes: when you hurt more than you could bear, you gave yourself up to it until it almost didn't hurt anymore at all.

Instead, I focused on her. The feeling of her thighs beneath my cheek as she pulled my head into her lap. The angle of her jaw, heart-shaped. Staring up at her through my hazy vision from below, she looked more like a goddess now than ever.

Then, she looked down. She saw me smiling up at her.

And through the worry in her eyes, she didn't seem able to help it.

She smiled back.

"I thought I'd lost you again, you know," she said softly. Her fingertips brushed across my brow, pleasantly cool. A benediction. "I was terrified that I was right this time. That I'd lost you for good."

"Oh, love." I closed my eyes, still smiling as I relished her touch. "You'll never lose me. You can't."

As the limo rumbled beneath us, I must have finally drifted back out of consciousness.

When I finally opened my eyes again, the rumbling had finally stopped.

“Where are we, love?” I slurred sleepily. I tried to sit up, only to discover that I couldn’t.

It hurt to try. Hurt even more to try again.

“We’re at the Bellagio. I had Charon book us a suite.” Evie held the sunglasses I’d given her on our first morning together in her hands. She unfolded them, then slipped them on over my eyes. “I don’t think you can walk on your own, so... are you familiar with *Weekend at Bernie’s*?”

“I don’t know any Bernies, no.” I squinted up at her. She was shimmering like the fucking sun. “Is that a Vermont thing?”

Evie laughed. A beautiful sound. The ringing of bells. “We’re going to carry you up to the room. If anyone stops us, play drunk.”

“Mm.” I smiled again as I stared up at her through the aviator’s frames. She was glowing through them with the most perfect, rich light. “You’re golden, Evie. My golden bride.”

She smirked. “Yeah. Just like that.”

Distantly, I was aware of my body being lifted up. When I turned my head to one side, I saw Malacoda’s face. Like a desperado. A stranger coming to town. He had a fat lip and a split in his brow to complete the effect. All he was missing was the six-shooter and a horse with no name.

To my other side, there was Abaddon. Sleek and classically handsome, like an old-timey advertising man. One who had just been in a bar fight.

Between them, they hauled my body out of the limo and towards the Bellagio’s front doors.

“Nice of you to come rescue me, lads.” My bare feet struggled to mimic movement as they dragged me along. “Hope you haven’t decided to become good Samaritans in my absence.”

Mal scoffed. “Oughta give you a shiner for making so much work for us.”

“Don’t worry, Dawnstar,” Don said with a dark chuckle. “We won’t forget how badly you owe us one.”

“Aw.” I continued to smile, letting my feet drag uselessly behind me. “So, you do love me.”

“Pff. We just couldn’t let the angels keep kicking your sorry arse to death before we had our turn.” Lock moved up ahead of us with Evie at his side.

She glowed so bright now, she almost canceled out the dark aura that Lock emanated.

Briefly, I wondered what color I glowed now.

I wondered why I was seeing colors at all.

“We’re going to get you inside and get you to bed.” Evie shot Lock a dirty look. “If you deserve any beatings from anyone once that’s sorted out, they’ll have to wait until you’re—”

“Hey! What’s going on here?” a gruff male voice called out to us.

“—healed,” Evie grumbled.

With great effort, I raised my head to the source of the voice.

A beat cop was standing between us and the Bellagio’s front doors. His hands were on his hips as he surveyed our little group.

“What happened to him?” the cop asked, nodding to me. “Where’s his shirt?”

I raised my eyebrows and looked between Mal and Don.

One of them should probably try explaining.

I wasn’t really in any state to be laying the basics of Heaven/Hell politics out to anyone right now, least of all the fine boys in blue of the Las Vegas Police Department.

Instead, I did my best to look drunk. Wasn’t exactly hard.

“I’m so sorry, officer. This is my husband,” Evie explained. “He’s... ah, a little drunk.”

“Sláinte!” I slurred, giving the officer two flimsy thumbs-up.

“We’re just trying to get him back up to the room.” Evie stepped forward and lowered her voice. “We’re taking him to rehab in the morning. I’m so embarrassed—we didn’t mean to cause you any alarm.”

I bit back a laugh. She really was a very good liar when she needed to be. As always, she did me proud.

“Is that so?” The officer moved past Evie. His eyes were focused on me. “You feeling all right, son?”

“Oh, top notch. Just a *little* too much tequila tonight.” I gave him a grin as I checked him for a glow—maybe everyone glowed now? If those damn angels had given me brain damage, I was going to be very cross.

He wasn’t glowing at all, though. Only Evie and Lock and Mal and Don.

Interesting.

The cop narrowed his eyes.

“Someone hit you, son? A little too hard, maybe?” He cocked his head to the side. “Or did you come by that accent honestly?”

“As honestly as anyone does.” I shrugged. As much as I *could* shrug right now. “Fell down some, ah... some stairs.”

“Some *stairs*, huh?” At my lie, the officer seemed more suspicious than ever. “Uh-huh. Yeah. I’ve heard that one before.” He looked between the others, then lowered his voice to a whisper directed my way. “You feel safe with these people, son?”

I laughed, then nodded. “I do. They’re friends. And even if they weren’t...”

“I think we’ll be getting the lad up to bed now, officer.” Lock stepped in and ruffled my hair fondly. “As ye can see, he’s had a touch too much tonight. Best let him sleep it off before he goes getting any more wild ideas, eh?”

Placated for the moment, the officer nodded and stepped aside.

Into the Bellagio we went.

“That went well,” I mumbled as Mal and Don dragged me through the doors.

“Nearly got ourselves arrested,” Lock said with a harsh laugh. “Just like old times.”

“You four have done things like this before?” Evie sounded genuinely concerned.

“Wish you could remember, love.” I chuckled and my head hurt and the lobby around us spun in circles. “You were usually in on it as well.” I stared up at her through the sunglasses as her glow became so bright and golden, it nearly hurt my eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me these sunglasses I gave you lets you see mystical auras?”

“What?” Evie’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Is that what those are?”

“I can only assume. Lock and Mal and Don are dark.” I sighed, tired but relieved. “And you’re golden. Pretty thing.”

“I’ve... seen things through them before,” Evie admitted. “But there was always so much going on around it, I always forgot to ask you what they meant.”

“Could be useful in the future,” I told her as Lock went to the front desk to check us in. “It’s good to know we can always count on good old Elvis to show us the way. Especially here in Vegas.”

“They really are his glasses, aren’t they?” Evie placed a hand against my cheek and the pain in my body narrowed to a single pinprick as I was bathed in her light. “Walk like an angel... Devil in disguise.”

I laughed at her paraphrasing of the song lyrics, but that quickly turned to coughing, then to the taste of blood in my mouth.

It was a bad sign.

EVIE

Don and Mal laid Luke on the bed of our suite. As soon as his body hit the mattress, he turned his head and coughed blood.

He'd been so strong and so stoic this whole time, it'd been difficult to tell exactly how much he'd been suffering. But as we'd brought him up to the suite, his pain had become more and more apparent.

"He looks even worse now." I looked to Lock, who seemed the most likely to have answers about this kind of thing. "We rescued him. Why is he only getting worse?"

"He's out of his realm, lass." Lock crossed his arms over his chest. "Not that we had any choice but to steal him away from it. If we'd left him there, who knows what the angels would have done to him next."

"What do we do?" I looked to Don and Mal as well. They were lesser demons, where Lock was an actual fallen angel, but even they knew more about all of this than I did right now.

"I don't s'pose Luke taught you how to heal?" Mal asked, looking grim.

"It should be part of the infernal powers you inherited with your new... *position*." Don nodded in encouragement. "When Dawnstar was the devil, he mended my wounds more times than I could count. Now that you've taken his place, you might be able to heal his as well."

"But that was when you and Luke were both infernal," Lock reminded Don. He looked to me again and sighed. "Even if ye can heal, lass, I dinnae ken that it would work on an angel. Luke is a being of Heaven again now. All of this... it's unprecedented, to say the least."

A long silence followed.

Then, I sat down on the bed next to Luke and placed my hand on his knee. He didn't stir.

"I have to try," I told the others. "Don't I?"

The three of them shared a look, then each gave me a nod.

"I reckon if ya don't, he'll only keep wastin' away here," said Mal.

"And returning him to Heaven to heal isn't an option," Don added. "For obvious reasons."

"We can try and lend ye strength, lass. If ye think it'll help," Lock offered. "But I don't want ye to push yerself too hard, and I want even less for ye to feel guilty if it's not in the cards. If you fail—and ye might—we'll have to look into other options." Lock glanced to Mal. "Don't s'pose the Greeks would want to be of any help in this? The Norse, maybe?"

"Hades might. He and Luke have always been on good terms. But he hasn't been seen in a long time." Mal said with a shrug. "And Odin's always been a fair hand as a healer... but you know how the Æsir are. They're weak enough as it is these days. Don't like meddlin' in other pantheons, neither. They've got more drama than you can shoot an arrow at among their own."

"The Fair Folk? Oberon?" Don suggested.

Lock grunted. "Making deals with the fae isnae something I'd want to turn to unless it was an absolute last resort."

"At least let me give it a shot before we start seriously talking about appealing to other gods," I said. I was still struggling to wrap my head around the politics of Heaven and Hell. Even if Luke and Hades *were* buddy-buddy together, I didn't want to complicate things even more by bringing other powerful beings into the equation. "I want to do this if I can. But... how do you lend me your strength?"

"Like this," Lock said. He placed his hand on the top of my head. My scalp prickled, tickling as I felt something staticky trickle down from his palm through my skin.

The sensation was amplified as Mal and Don placed each placed a hand on one of my shoulders.

Suddenly, any feelings of nausea that were lingering in my stomach were gone. The flame in my womb flickered, growing stronger than ever, and my hands felt incredibly warm. My soul felt sturdy and full of light.

"Feel it?" Mal asked.

“Yes,” I breathed, closing my eyes. “I really do.”

With all three of their powers surging through me, I didn’t even have to open my eyes to see Luke’s form there on the bed. The outline of his body was a brilliant, glimmering white. The color of angelic auras, if Luke’s sunglasses theory was to be believed.

It was yet another reminder of Luke’s sacrifice. When we’d been married, we’d been human and devil. Now, we were devil and angel. Even now that he was back within my reach again, fate was still finding ways to keep us apart.

I wouldn’t let that stop me, though.

I may have been Queen of Hell now, but Luke was still my husband. Angel or not.

Within the glowing white outline of Luke’s body, I saw the places where he was hurt the most. The wounds on his palms and feet were a blistering red neon. Another flash of crimson was splashed across his ribs on one side. When I moved my hand to his chest, I saw the outline of my own fingers, glowing gold.

That was... odd. If I was really infernal, I should have glowed darkly like Don and Mal and Lock.

Yet another mystery. Not one that I had time to solve right now, though.

Luke’s final injuries were also on his chest. He had a stab wound in his other side. At a glance earlier, it had seemed small and insignificant, but now I could see how deep it ran. His pectorals had been slashed several times, these ones shallower. The broken nose he was currently sporting didn’t glow red at all, but there was a flicker of scarlet across his temple that worried me.

A head wound. Maybe a concussion, though it was impossible to determine what had caused it.

“I can see where he’s hurt,” I told the others, eyes still closed. “Not all of his injuries are visible to the naked eye, and not all of the ones that we can see are the ones that are hurting him.”

“It’s the wounds inflicted by objects of power that we have to worry about,” said Don. “Those are probably the ones you’re able to see now.”

“How bad off is he, lass?” asked Lock. “Tell us true.”

“Pretty bad,” I said with a sigh. “But I think I can do this.”

At least, I wanted to.

At least now I knew where to place my hands.

Luke had healed my body once. I still carried the memory of the comforting warmth his touch had brought to my skin. He'd caressed my body with love. Adoration. Worship.

Maybe that was the key. Luke had told me once that the powers of the gods were dependent on belief. On love.

And there was no one that I believed in or loved more than him.

"I love you, Luke." I placed my golden hand over his pearly one, covering up the red glow of his wound. "I should have said it a long time ago. I'm sorry I didn't. But I'm saying it now. I love you, and I want you to come back to me. Healed and whole."

I caressed his skin and imagined the power inside me flowing over the place where the nail had pierced his skin. I envisioned it cleaning the wound like cool, fresh water. In my mind's eye, I let my love for Luke flow into his injury as the water washed it clean.

"Go on, lass," Lock urged me with a whisper. "I think it's working."

Beneath my hand, I could feel Luke's energy too. It was waning, but as I poured my love into him, his aura hummed, shimmering a little brighter.

When I moved my hand away, the red glow on his palm was gone.

"I love you," I breathed, grabbing his other hand with both of mine. I clasped his palm tight in my fingers. "I've always loved the way you've treated me. You've protected me from everything you could, across so many lifetimes. Even when you were up against the impossible. Even when it hurt."

He was glowing brighter than ever now. His aura chimed with the sound of a wet finger running around the rim of a crystal wine glass.

The other wound on his hand slowly faded away.

I moved to his feet next. It seemed like the power inside me should have been waning as I emptied it into him, but if anything, I felt stronger than ever now.

I didn't know if it was the love that Lock, Mal and Don had for Luke giving me extra doses of strength, or if it was just the love Luke and I shared, amplifying. Reverberating. Bouncing between us and healing anything that stood in its path.

I had a feeling it was probably a little bit of both.

"When you kiss me, it feels like the entire universe is exploding against my lips." I let my words wash over Luke along with the power and

all the love as I ran my hand down the top of his left foot. “When you hold me, it feels like everything’s coming together, finally, after so long of being broken apart.”

I moved my hand to his other foot. I could tell from the size of the wound that when the nail was driven through his feet, this was the one that had been on top.

“And when I look at you,” I told him, “I see a future for us. One that I want. One that I *need*, Luke. Now, more than ever. Come back to me. I believe in you. I believe in *us*. I love you. Come back to me so you can finally hear me say it. Please.”

“It’s helping.” Mal sounded equal parts shocked and in awe. “I can see it. Quick, Evie. Do up the rest.”

“Demons healing angels.” Don gave a brief chuckle. “*There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio...*”

My chest was vibrating with energy. It gushed over Luke’s body, molten gold mixed with black oil, as I passed my hand over the cuts on his pecs. The red glow on his temple didn’t look as bad now, but the crimson over his ribs looked angrier than ever.

It felt like the energy I was pouring into Luke was helping him heal himself, too. It was redirecting its efforts to the most essential places now.

I followed its lead and pressed my palm to the side of Luke’s head.

“I love you, you stubborn, perfect bastard.” I dipped my lips down to brush against his. “You’re mine and I’m yours. You’re going to be okay, and I’m never going to lose you again after this. However we have to make this work, we will.”

My mouth crushed against Luke’s as I forced the full flow of the power into the wound on his head. For a moment, nothing happened—then Luke groaned in pain against my lips.

When the sounds of his agony had faded, to my amazement, he kissed me back.

“That hurt like a bitch,” Luke grunted through his teeth, panting. “But you’re an angel, love.”

“No,” I said, positioning my hand against Luke’s ribs. The final piece of this puzzle. The last thing we had left to heal. “I’m most definitely not. Now hold still—if you thought that was bad, *this* is gonna hurt like hell.”

I moved my hands to Luke’s ribs, and he hissed.

“I love you, Luke,” I said one last time, gathering up all the strings of power within me. They felt limitless. It was only as I spoke the words that I realized Lock, Don and Mal had all pulled their hands away. “I need you to know that.”

“I’ve always known, love,” Luke mumbled back to me.

My breath caught in my throat. I didn’t dare open my eyes yet, lest the spell be broken, but if I could have, I would have stared at him in surprise. “You have?”

“Course. Always.” Luke chuckled, then cleared his throat. “And I need you to know that I’m excited to be a father. Sweet of you, really, to bring me back with the gift of something new to love.”

I furrowed my brow. I still hadn’t figured out how to tell Luke yet. I’d been waiting until he was healthy and conscious again, at the very least.

But apparently, Luke had already figured it out himself.

“You’re happy, then?” I caressed his ribs but held the power back. I knew as soon as I unleashed it, he was going to hurt all over again.

I wanted just a moment with him before I sullied it by inflicting more pain.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Luke rasped. “Aren’t you?”

“I am,” I said softly. The flame in my belly purred with delight. “But... how did you know?”

“I’ll tell you all about it once you’ve finished fixing me up,” Luke promised. His hand curled over mine, pressing my fingertips firmly against the red glow over his ribs. “But suffice to say... it was more than just a devil of a guess.”

EVIE

The next few days passed like winter fading into spring. Luke was unconscious for most of them, but his condition improved with every morning.

In his few lucid moments, his only interest was holding me in his arms.

“I know you must have questions, love,” he mumbled sleepily against my hip on the first morning. “I have a few of my own, truth be told.”

I smoothed his dark hair down over the back of his head. “We can talk when you’re ready, handsome. I’m just glad to have you back.”

“Mm. That’s gracious of you.” He hummed with pleasure at my touch. “I appreciate the chance to get my head together. You must think me some kind of dim-witted fool for the way I’ve been.”

“I don’t know.” I smiled down at him. “Maybe I like my sleepy, dopey, cuddly husband.”

“And I like my golden wife.” His hand moved to my stomach. “My golden child.”

“You promise that you’re—” *Happy*, I wanted to say, but I felt Luke’s head get heavy on my thigh before I could finish.

He was asleep again.

He’d been gone from me for such a short time, but in those scarce days, he’d been hurt badly enough that I couldn’t begrudge him the chance to rest.

For the most part, our allies kept their distance. Only Lock visited, and even then, only in disguise.

“Nice fake mustache,” I told him a few days later as I opened the door. He was wearing a thick false one over his real one, deep brown and curled up at the ends like it belonged to a silly character in a play.

“Ach, I’m just tryin’ tae keep a low profile, is all. Don’t need the angels figuring out where yer holed up.” Lock peered around me to look at Luke, who was asleep on the bed with one arm draped across his own chest. Out cold. “How is he?”

“Improving. Slowly, but he’s better every time he wakes up.” I brushed my hair behind my ear and frowned. “I thought the healing took. But he obviously needs something more than that.”

It was my one shame about Luke’s healing. I’d hoped that he’d be back to his old self immediately. But obviously, I hadn’t done enough.

“Yer still infernal, lass. He’s still an angel. Some of his wounds might be beyond the reach of your new powers.”

“But I’ve checked.” I had. When I called the powers to life and closed my eyes, I hadn’t found anything left to heal. “There’s no more glowing red on his body. Everything physical that I can mend, I’ve already mended it.”

“Ah. Well...” Lock rubbed the back of his neck and gave me a tense smile. “Maybe it’s no’ his body that’s the thing hurting now. Maybe it’s something...*deeper*, ye ken.”

“You think I need to try to heal... what? His soul?” I blinked, taken aback. I hadn’t even considered that yet.

“Er... well.” Lock’s smile widened. A flush rose to his cheeks. “I was thinking a wee roll in the heather might be more prudent, but ye make a compelling point. Then again, the two might be not be quite so different, eh?”

“That’s... definitely an interesting idea, at least.” I couldn’t pretend that making love to Luke wasn’t a tantalizing option. “Do you think he’s well enough for that, though?”

I cast a glance back over my shoulder. Over the last seventy-two hours, Luke had been unconscious more than he’d been awake. I knew from the way he thrashed in his sleep at night that he was having nightmares. They were a kind that I couldn’t wake him from, no matter how hard I tried.

All I could do was hold him until his body went quiet again. All I could do was wait for the terrors in his mind to fade.

“Not tae be too forward, lass, but, ah...” Lock laughed, suddenly sounding uncomfortable. “I’ve heard how he talks of ye. In more lifetimes of yours than I’d like tae admit, I’ve heard how the two of ye go at it, too. Like a wild stallion and a broodmare.”

“Um. Thanks, I think?”

Lock brightened. “Aye. Meant it as a compliment. All I’m saying is, he loves ye. Ye love him. And he needs ye more than ever. Speaking from strictly personal experience on the matter, mind... a lad could overcome an awful lot for the promise of the body of a lass. Particularly that of a lass he loves.”

The idea still surprised me a little, but I wasn’t ready to count it out just yet.

Not until I’d given it a shot, at least.

“How’s everything else holding up?” I asked, trying not to look too hard at Lock’s fake mustache. It really was too ridiculous for words.

“The rest of the Fallen still don’t ken anything,” Lock assured me. “The angels have been sweeping Vegas for clues to yer man’s whereabouts, but they’ve found naught. Oh, and Charon is house-training The Beast, ye should be glad to know.”

“Good.” Any amount of training Charon wanted to give The Beast before we could return to Hell, I was grateful for. I wasn’t ready to deal with the Fallen until Luke was back to his old self so he could whip them into shape, and the absence of any angels on our trail meant I’d have time to get Luke to that point. “And you, Mal and Don are keeping my family and friends safe?”

“Aye. I’ve been tagging along with Joanie when she goes above. Mal’s got Ava covered, and Don has Bea. Much to her utter delight and feigned chagrin, mind.” Lock gave me a wink.

A tiny laugh escaped my lips. “She’s working awful hard to resist his charms, isn’t she?”

“Only on the outside,” Lock assured me, chuckling as well. “On the inside, though—I fear she’s a goner, and him along with her.”

It made my heart warm to hear it. I knew Bea had a lot of difficulties when it came to the future of her love life, especially with her wedding on the way. But maybe her husband-to-be would understand.

It was only an arranged marriage, after all. Not a love match.

I wanted Bea and Don to be happy. Especially if that meant being happy together. It was hard not to keep holding out hope that somehow, they'd get there.

"And my parents?" I asked.

"Legion's watching over them." Lock laughed again. "And they're watching over her as well. Yer ma grounded her yesterday, if ye can believe it. No dessert for a week because she caught the poor lass trying to light up a smoke in the bathroom."

"Oh, god." I raised my hand to my lips to conceal my smile. "Legion must hate that."

"I think she's considering going off the smokes, actually." Lock shrugged. "She says that mother of yers makes a fine blueberry pie. Worth trading addictions for, even."

"Good for her." I laid a hand on Lock's arm. "Thank you, Lock. Thank you all. For everything."

"No thanks necessary." Lock waved my words away. "Ye want tae repay us, you get that man of yers back to his auld self. Then, we'll all be square."

As Lock turned to go, I closed the door behind him.

Slowly, I pivoted on my toes to look at Luke again.

He was serene now. No thrashing. He looked every bit the angel I knew he was. The angel he'd always been, deep down.

But as a furrow crossed his brow, I knew that Lock was right on at least one count.

I needed to bring him back. Properly, this time. Not just in body and in health, but in soul, too.

And if that meant trying what Lock had suggested...

I untied the silk kimono that Lock had brought for me with the rest of my clothes a few days ago. Beneath it, I wore a satiny slip, devil red.

"Luke," I whispered as I crawled into bed next to him. I moved my fingertips across his brow, and slowly, he stirred.

"Love." His voice was full of exhausted relief. His hands moved for my shoulders, trying to pull me down next to him so he could cuddle me up once more. "Come here... Let me hold you again."

"You can hold me. But not there."

Luke's eyes cracked open into thin, curious slits. "No?"

I took his hands from my shoulders and moved them to my hips. “Hold me here instead.”

One of Luke’s dark brows arched with interest. His eyes opened a little wider. “Is that where you’d like to be held, now?”

“Yes. It is.” I shifted onto my knees and pulled my nightie up so Luke’s hands would slip down its fabric and onto my skin instead. “And there... that’s even better.”

“My Evie.” Luke moved to me, burying his face in my lap. “Beautiful, perfect creature.”

I wasn’t wearing any panties. Luke’s nose dipped into the golden curls of my pubic hair. Warmth flooded between my thighs.

That should have been all it took.

But Luke’s eyes were still so tired, and as he nuzzled my cunt with the tip of his nose, he was far too innocent. Far too close to drifting back off to sleep.

“No, darling. Stay awake for me.” I took his face in my hands and turned it back up toward mine. “I need you, Luke. I need you awake. I need you to be yourself again. I need you to be *mine*.”

“I am yours, love. But...” Luke’s blues met my grays for a moment, then he closed his eyes shut tight once more. “I’m sorry. I don’t know if I can.”

“Your body is healed, Luke.” I ran one of my thumbs across his cheek, frowning. “I’ve checked everything. Unless...” A horrible thought struck me. It was a dagger in my ribs just to entertain it. “Do you not want me anymore?”

Luke laughed. It was a genuine sound, but it was ragged with pain. Pain from where, I still didn’t know. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’d want you on my deathbed, love. You’re the kind of woman who’s impossible not to want.”

“You *are* on your deathbed, Luke.” How did he not see it? His body was whole again, but there was still something wrong. Something that I couldn’t reach, no matter how hard I tried.

I knew this might have been my last chance to fix it. Maybe my only chance.

“I know, love. I feel it.” He took my hand and guided it down his body beneath the blankets until it rested against his cock.

I nearly gasped. “You’re hard.”

“Hard not to be, with the smell of your wet cunt in my nose like this.” He smiled up at me, but there was sadness in his eyes. “As I said. Even on my deathbed, I want you. But I *am* dying, Evie. I died a thousand times nailed to that cross in that cell you found me in. And here, now, with you. Yes. I’m dying still.”

I was struggling to understand whether Luke was speaking in metaphors, or if he meant it. If there really was some damage from the wounds the angels had inflicted on him still lurking inside his body, I wanted to fix it.

But that look in his eyes...

My chest cracked inward. Suddenly, my body felt like glass.

Maybe this was something that couldn’t be fixed.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” I begged him, and he sighed.

“I made a vow, love. A vow that couldn’t be broken. I promised to give myself over to Heaven willingly and stay there so that you would be safe.” He moved his own hand to my belly, caressing it beneath my slip. “Our child, too. Though, there was no way of knowing that at the time.”

“You didn’t break it, though,” I pointed out. “You held up your end of the bargain. You went to Heaven. You didn’t try to leave. We took you away. It’s not exactly like they left you in a position where you were able to walk out on your own.”

“And for a few blissful hours, I thought you might’ve succeeded,” Luke murmured. “You’re my anchor. You and the baby both. I thought maybe, with the way you were glowing golden—”

“You saw that too?” Luke had called me golden several times on the night of his rescue, but honestly... I’d kind of assumed that he was either too out of it to put together a more coherent compliment, or that maybe he’d been talking about my hair.

“You’ve got love wrapped around you like a fur cape, pretty girl. The love of the Almighty Himself.” Luke shook his head. “I thought maybe it meant that the love between us was enough. But now...” He took my other hand and placed it against his chest. There, right in the valley between his pecs, his skin was horribly cold. “I know I was wrong.”

“You feel like ice there.” My brow furrowed. He was right—something was definitely wrong. But I didn’t know what, or what he meant. “What happened, Luke? What did we do wrong?”

“You did nothing wrong, love. The problem lies in fate. My vow was a serious one. Holy. I didn’t break it, but it was still broken. Now, my soul is forfeit. Neither Heaven nor Hell can claim it. Neither can I.”

“Who has it, then?” I tried to imagine where things that were neither Heaven nor Hell would go. “Limbo? Because if so—Don and I can just go get it for you. We’ll bring it back to you.” I smiled and rubbed my thumb along the ridge of his pec. “Then, you’ll be right as rain.”

“Not limbo, love. Something bigger than that.” Luke took my hand from his chest and raised it to his lips. When he kissed my skin, beneath my other set of fingers, his cock twitched with need. “It’s in a pair of very capable hands—but not a pair of hands that are accustomed to giving things back.”

“One of... the other gods, maybe?” I thought of Mal’s talk of Hades. The god of a different underworld. It made a kind of sense, but I had a feeling I was missing the mark.

“The Fourth has my soul now, darling.” Luke closed his eyes and held my hand to his cheek. “The rider on the pale horse. Death. Every night, I feel myself being pulled to him in my dreams—and no matter how hard I try to fight it, there’s no getting away.”

“The Fourth is... Oh.” My face fell. My heart crashed down into my stomach and the flame in my womb curled up in on itself. The Fourth had always been a good friend to Luke and me. But if he was finally being called to collect his due... “Fuck. This is all my fault.”

“It’s not,” Luke promised. “You don’t need to worry, love. I would have spent eternity in agony if you hadn’t done what you’d done.”

“But now, I’ll lose you all over again.” Just a few moments ago, I’d been so hopeful that a good, solid fuck would bring Luke back to me. That hope was dead now. And soon, Luke would be too. “And this time, it really will be forever. Won’t it?”

I searched Luke’s eyes for the slightest glimmer of possibility, but I didn’t find it.

Instead, he just tugged me down into bed beside him and moved his lips close to mine.

“Forever’s only a concept, darling girl.” I didn’t think that was true at all—but I didn’t know how to argue semantics with Luke. All I wanted to do right now was scream, then probably, cry. “Just be mine. Be with me

while you can. Hold me while you're able and, god, tell me you love me again."

"Of course I love you, Luke." I'd only just started to piece my broken heart back together, but after this latest revelation, I could feel those shards turning to dust and blowing away on the wind. "I love you with everything I am."

"Then it was all worth it." He moved his lips closer. His breathing was shallow. There was ice there in his breath, too. "You saved me from torture. You gave me a chance at peace. Soon, you'll give me an heir. And best of all..." He leaned in even closer. Tenderly, his lips brushed against mine. "You've given me a chance to kiss you again."

"Is that all you want? A kiss?" I wanted to hit him. I wanted to kick myself. I wanted to burn down Heaven and Hell just to make sure that Luke could stay here by my side.

And I knew that it wouldn't make any difference. If even Luke wasn't entertaining the notion of defying Death, of fighting this... how did I have any hope of setting it right?

"For starters, yes." Luke's eyes opened, glimmering with that same old wickedness in them that I'd come to love more than life itself. "But I do think you climbed into this bed with something more than just a kiss in mind."

My eyes trailed to the blankets over Luke's lap. My fingers were still curled against his cock. It was still hard and thick and—thankfully—undeniably burning hot.

"You can't be serious," I breathed. "So *now* you want to fuck?"

"Why not?" Luke's lips curled into an aching smirk. "When death knocks at your door, it's best to say *fuck it* and just accept your fate... But frankly, if I have to go, I'd rather go out fucking you instead."

"I'm not going to let you die with your cock inside me, you bastard." Tears burned my eyes as I tore my gaze away from him. I should have taken my hand away from his cock, too—but some things were harder to let go of than others.

And I'd rarely known Luke's cock to be anything but hard.

"My time's not up yet, love." He reached up to my cheek and turned my face back to his. "And you're still my wife. I can order you, if you like." His smirk darkened handsomely at the memory of our own vows. "I might like that myself."

I blinked down at him, feeling my body and my heart and my soul all tearing themselves to shreds all over again.

“You might have to.” Even through all this pain, my cunt throbbed at the thought.

“You want me to?”

I swallowed back my tears, then nodded. “Order me, Luke.”

Our vows to obey each other worked both ways.

“Kiss me, Evie,” Luke whispered, and obediently, my lips moved to his.

His tongue slipped into my mouth immediately. His kiss was greedy and hungry and full of a passion I still worried his dying body didn’t have the energy to sustain.

But that worry was quickly put to rest. Luke took my wrist in his hand and squeezed tight, just enough to hurt a little. He held my fingers to the cold part of his chest as he claimed the prize of my mouth.

“Now,” he hushed, pulled his lips away. “Ride me. Ride me until you come, then ride me harder still. I don’t want you to even think about stopping. Only how good it feels to have me inside.”

My body slipped beneath the blankets with him. I hooked a knee across his hips, mounting him. He let go of my wrist then, but only so he could hold my waist in his hands instead.

“Squeeze my cock in that pretty little fist of yours,” Luke ordered. “Feel how hard I am for you. Feel the way you make my cock swell stiff just for wanting you. Long and thick and all yours.”

My fingers wrapped themselves around his shaft. I pressed the tip of his cock against the sensitive bud of my swollen clit and stroked him, feeling it. Just like he’d told me to.

He was so thick that every time I took him inside me, I was worried he wouldn’t fit. So long, I had no idea how he managed to make enough room in my cunt to take the entire length of him—but somehow, he always did. So stiff, I knew that he’d stay hard for me even long after we were both completely spent.

“Raise your hips up. Tease yourself with it.” Luke’s lips pulled back in a dark, handsome snarl. “Let me feel your honey dripping down my shaft. Let me see how bad you want it.”

“*Fuck*,” I swore. Obeying. I couldn’t help but obey. “I want you too much already.”

Through all the tragedies of our love, wanting Luke was the one thing that never completely went away.

“I want you too, love.” He reached up to brush my hair behind my ear. It was an abrupt shift of tone. He went from domineering to sweet in an instant.

But Luke’s sweetness wasn’t soft. It was hard and rough and demanding of sweetness in return.

“Can I have you?” I breathed, desperate for him now.

“Kiss me, love. Shut me up,” he breathed back to me. “Keep kissing me and you can have whatever you like.”

Desperate for him, I crushed my lips against his. With his order fulfilled, now he couldn’t order me at all anymore.

Now, he was all mine—and I was all his.

I shifted my hips forward, still kissing him as I caught his tip right at my entrance. As I plunged myself down on him, our kiss turned into a frantic gasp of surprise.

“Oh.” I panted as I settled my hips against his. He was all the way inside me. A slick, perfect entry. His cock throbbed within me, pulsing against my G-spot like a heartbeat.

Even just that, if I stayed there for long enough, would have been plenty to send me gently and gorgeously over the edge.

But Luke wasn’t satisfied with gentle.

“More,” Luke growled. He sucked my lip between his and bit it, straight white teeth sinking into tender flesh.

That tiny burst of pain was enough to urge me into movement. I wrapped my arms around his head, twining my fingers in his thick, dark waves. I reclaimed my lip, then bit his lower lip right back.

If he wanted more, he’d have it.

He could have as much of me as he liked.

My hips set a rhythm. It felt like dancing, the way we’d danced together once in Lust. I knew the beat because it was the same as our heartbeats.

I knew the song. It was one we’d played on the piano together in Heresy as I sat on Luke’s lap. One we’d written together long ago.

His cock was hot and stiff inside me. Every time I plunged down on him, a small explosion of pleasure went off inside me.

Enough explosions like that, and I knew there’d be an even bigger one.

One that we'd share.

My head was thrumming with need. Around him, my pussy clenched and released with every thrust, pulling him even deeper inside.

And still, I kissed him. I kissed him to keep him here with me. I kissed him like it would be the last time.

"Fuck." Luke pulled out of the kiss to grunt the curse. He drew a breath—a ragged one—and I couldn't tell if it was because of the sex, or because he was slipping away from me completely. "*Fuck*, Evie. Just... *Fuck*."

Before I could wonder any further, Luke's hips bucked up beneath me. He rolled me over on the mattress, changing positions.

Now, he was on top of me.

Now, he was in control.

For a furious flurry of thrusts, he wasn't dying at all anymore. He was his old self again, taking me just as roughly as we'd always taken each other.

He was my Luke. My Lucifer. My husband, the Devil himself.

And as he pounded his cock into me, burying it deep inside with every thrust, he was very much alive.

When the explosion came, just like I'd known it would, we shuddered through it together. Luke's cum gushed into me, rushing in and pooling in every space that his cock didn't already fill. There wasn't much of that to be had, though. My cunt was made to fit him. When there wasn't any more room for his cum inside me, it followed the thickness of his shaft and spilled out onto my pussy and the mattress beneath me.

His teeth found my neck and I joined him in the ecstasy. He bit down, claiming me. I was his wife and his bitch and his goddess and his whore all over again. The world turned bright and full of color. Then, as I clutched at him, it turned so white that for a moment, I couldn't see anything at all.

"Luke," I gasped, smoothing my hands against his cheeks. The world faded back in slowly. So did a sudden, intense exhaustion. "Luke. I need you. Don't leave me. Please don't go."

He turned our bodies onto their sides. He was inside me still as the pleasure smoothed out into a different kind of desperation.

I hugged my legs around his waist, crossing my ankles so he couldn't pull away from me.

He didn't. He only folded me closer to him and held me tightly in his arms.

"I'm here, love," he promised. "I'm here. I need you too."

We lay like that for what felt like an eternity. I could only measure the moments by the sounds of our breaths in between kisses. I waited for our breathing to slow into something normal, but it didn't.

The reality of losing him was too much for normal right now.

Instead, we clung to each other and let the heaving in our chests say all the things we'd already said a thousand times in a thousand past lives.

I love you. I need you. Don't go.

I stared into his eyes for a long while, searching his blues for something. Anything.

I wasn't going to lose him. I couldn't bear it. Not again.

What I needed was an angel.

But all I had right now was an angel—the one in my bed. An angel and a broken heart that didn't know how to give up all hope.

Slowly, I slid my tongue over my lips, thinking hard.

I'd obeyed all of Luke's orders.

Maybe now, it was time for him to obey one of mine.

"Tell me how to save you." My voice rasped raggedly in my throat. My eyes were locked on his.

He looked concerned for a moment. Then, as he bit his lower lip, his expression turned to one of tentative surprise.

"There... might be one." Luke's brow lowered into a frown of annoyance. "But I don't like it, and I doubt you will, either."

"Tell me, Luke." I didn't care whether he liked it or not. I wasn't giving up on him. On us. All three of us, now.

On the life we were meant to have together. One we'd fought like hell throughout the ages for this chance to finally build.

It was a life I'd do anything to save.

"Damn you, woman." Luke shook his head, trying to fight my order. But this time, I knew he couldn't. The highest vow he held right now was the one he'd made to me when he'd made me his bride. "Fine. I'll tell you. But you have to do something for me, first."

"You're dying, Luke," I said, exasperated. His cock was still hard inside me, but this really wasn't the time. "I don't know that we have time to go again."

“Maybe in a bit,” Luke said with an exasperated laugh. He lifted me off of him by my hips and laid me at his side. “But no. I want to show you something first. Something very precious to me.”

“Another one of my memories?” I guessed. My wings were folding again now. They tucked themselves against my shoulder blades until, somehow, they faded away.

“No,” Luke said, moving his lips against my cheek. The little starburst mark he’d left there on my cheekbone, right where he’d first kissed me, glowed hot and bright beneath his mouth. “One of mine.”

LUKE

Somewhere In A Memory...

The Garden Of Eden, The Eighth Day

The Almighty had taken a full week to create the universe and all that inhabited it.

To fuck it all up, I'd only needed a day.

My body still ached from my fall. The places on my shoulder blades where the angels had torn my wings out were still raw and caked with blood. For the time being, I'd invented clothing to keep the elements off my back and hide those particular wounds. The black linen shirt and trousers I wore were comfortable. They suited me. In Eden, the humans were still wandering around innocent and naked. It was the opposite of erotic, really.

The best thing about clothing was the way it concealed nakedness. It made the body into something individually sacred. A secret only revealed to those they trusted.

When I found good reason to, I imagined I'd rather enjoy taking these clothes back off.

I'd fashion a new pair of wings for myself someday soon, too. Black ones, dark and sinister, to counter the white wings the angels still wore. The ones that I'd lost.

Already, I thought of them—the angels—as something entirely different than myself.

They'd wanted order. They'd wanted control.

I'd only ever wanted freedom. Freedom for the humans, and freedom for myself, too.

Still, I was certain that all of it was somehow connected. All part of the Almighty's ineffable plan.

I wasn't sure how taming all the demons of Hell and crowning myself their king was part of that plan yet, but what could I say?

I'd always suspected I'd look dashing in a crown.

Now that I'd carved out a kingdom for myself, I found myself still wanting.

I was powerful. I was angry.

Worst of all, I was bored.

I wandered the edges of Eden with a scowl on my face and my hands in my pockets, looking for something new to ruin. Another feather in my cap.

Something else in the perfection of creation that I could lay claim to for my own.

And just when I thought I might have to spend the rest of eternity roaming these lands with nothing to do—

I heard something soft and sad come from behind the mulberry bushes. Something so gentle and sweet that it erased the scowl from my face in an instant.

In its place, curiosity reigned. Not just because I wondered what kind of creature would make such a mournful noise—or, for that matter, why?

But because it stirred something within me, something tender and hungry that I hadn't even realized lived within my chest at all, I pulled the bushes aside. That was when I saw her. I recognized her in an instant.

I'd been there, watching from a vantage point up above, when the Almighty had stirred her from dirt and breathed His spirit into her lungs.

She was pale like moonlight. Her hair was long and thick and golden as the sun itself. Her tiny waist flared out beautifully into wide, lovely hips and a heart-shaped arse. Her long, shapely legs were exquisite.

Her shoulders heaved with grief.

Lilith. The first woman. The man the Almighty had paired her with hadn't inspired me enough to even remember his name, but hers... I shaped it on my tongue, too enraptured to make a sound.

Lilith. Hers was a name I'd been sure to remember. So perfect it was impossible to forget.

I'd seen her before, yes, but never like this. Never this close.

Just seeing her from this new angle made my jaw ache with how badly I wanted to sink my teeth into her.

It made other things ache too.

"What's that noise you're making?" I asked, finally choosing to make myself known to her. "What does it mean?"

I couldn't help myself, really. There was only one woman on this entirely blessed planet, and even though she already belonged to another, I'd already decided that she ought to be mine instead.

At the sound of my voice, she startled and turned. Her cheeks were stained with something wet that we hadn't come up with a name for yet. Her eyes, gray and full of mysteries, were watery too.

I invented a new word in that moment: *heartache*. It was what I felt when I saw the sadness on her face.

It was what I imagined she felt too—but why?

"I think I'm crying," she said, sniffing. She wiped the wetness from her cheeks with her slender fingertips and kept them there, like she was trying to hide that crying from me. "I think these are tears."

"And why are you crying, darling girl?" I gestured to the treetops that canopied over her, where the beasts of the air were sleeping soundly. I was considering calling them *birds*. "You're in Paradise, after all. Everything you need, you only need to want."

"I've just been thrown out of it, actually." Lilith pursed her lips for a moment, and the crying seemed to subside.

"Have you?" I furrowed my brow, feeling a sudden fury. More heartache, too. "Why?"

I knew a thing or two about being thrown out of the place where I rightfully belonged.

"My husband doesn't want me to be his wife." She shrugged like the notion didn't hurt her. Like it didn't matter.

She wasn't fooling me. If it didn't hurt, then why would she cry?

"Idiot of a husband, then." There—another new word. *Idiot*. It was perfect for him. I almost smiled at my own cleverness, but that seemed inappropriate given Lilith's tears. "You're perfect. The Almighty ensured it himself. What's not to want?"

“Adam doesn’t like me.”

I gestured at her. All of her. “What’s not to like?”

Her gray eyes narrowed slowly with suspicion. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Whatever you’re doing.” Her eyes glinted darkly with something I assume must have been malice. “I know who you are.”

“Oh? And who am I?” I took a step closer. Just to see if I could.

To see if she’d run.

“Lucifer. The Dawnstar. Satan. The Devil.” She said each of my names with a venom that felt almost... *holy*. Or unholy, maybe. It was still hard to tell which was which. “You’re the adversary. They warned me about you.”

“The angels?”

“Who else?”

Finally, I couldn’t fight my smirk anymore. “And what did they say?”

“That you would come and try to tempt me,” she said, a little uncertain now. Maybe the angels had been vague. That seemed like their style. “That anything you offered, I shouldn’t take.”

“And what would I offer?”

She licked her lips as she looked me up and down. “I don’t know.”

“Well, what do you want?”

“I don’t want anything *you’re* offering. That’s for sure.”

Mm. She was feisty, wasn’t she? Like a little flicker of hellfire, unleashed upon a world that didn’t yet know how to appreciate her heat.

“Maybe not so sure now, though.” I gestured to Paradise again. “If they’ve kicked you out, I don’t image they intend for you to fend for yourself out here on your own.”

She blinked, then sighed. A little act of surrender. “I think they expect me to die out here.”

“Because your idiot husband doesn’t like you?” I refused to use the male human’s name. I’d forgotten it already again, anyway. “That hardly seems fair.”

“He had... strange ideas about mating. How we should do it.” Her brow furrowed. “I didn’t like his ideas. I had my own.”

My eyebrow arched. “Mating? I haven’t heard of that before. What is it?”

“I don’t know exactly. Something special between two people, definitely. But I’m not sure how it’s supposed to go. We were trying to figure that out.” Her voice dripped with frustration. “But when I told him how *I* wanted to do it, he looked at me like I was worms and told the angels that he wanted me gone.”

“And they gave him his way?” Impossible. Whatever idiot ideas he’d had, I didn’t imagine they were worth abandoning her over. She was the better of the two humans the Almighty had created, after all. I couldn’t think of anything worth abandoning her over at all. “That’s bullshit.”

For a glorious moment, her lips twitched like she wanted to laugh.

“Yeah,” she agreed when she’d composed herself once more. “Yeah, it is.”

“This *mating*.” I liked the sound of the word on my lips. “What’s its purpose? What’s the goal?”

“To make me into a mother. I guess.” She shrugged, suddenly looking smaller. I didn’t like it. I preferred her tall and angry, with her chin held high. Taking up as much space as she liked. “And now, I’ll never be one at all.”

“Do you want that? To be a mother?” If I could determine her desires, maybe I could help her.

I wanted to help her. If the angels had scorned her, then I understood the pain she must have felt.

I was drawn to her for other reasons, too. Reasons that I couldn’t quite explain. Not yet. Instinct, maybe. Something older than the universe that called my body to hers and made me want to lay claim to it.

Looking at her made my cock throb. It made the roots of my teeth ache.

I knew exactly what I wanted from her, even if I didn’t yet know why.

I wanted to make her mine and mine alone.

“How did he want to do it, then?” I asked. Then, feeling cruel, I added, “Bet it was stupid. Bet it was bullshit, too.”

“It was.” She crossed her arms beneath her breasts—and what beautiful breasts she had. Heavy and perky and full, peaked with nipples that I wanted to bite as well. “He wanted me to lay in the dirt with my legs spread and not make a sound until he decided what he ought to do.”

I snorted. “In the dirt? You?” Putting a creature as exquisite as her in the dirt was surely some kind of blasphemy. The other human was

obviously something so much worse than an idiot. He was selfish and cruel as well. "That's not where you belong."

"That's what I said!" She looked vindicated, and I didn't blame her.

Our second point of agreement was even more tantalizing than our first.

"How did you want to do it?" I asked. "You said you had your own ideas."

Suddenly, her cheeks were flushed pink like a sunrise. The color extended down her neck, all the way to those perfect nipples of hers.

I wanted to pull her to me so I could take them into my mouth. To what end, I didn't know yet. Nothing practical, I was sure, but I wanted to, just the same. Intensely, for no reason.

And just like that, I invented desire.

"Adam told me it was wrong of me to want it. So... I don't want to say," Lilith mumbled, looking away from me. "But it wouldn't have involved me being in the disgusting *dirt*."

"Good. You should only have to be in the dirt if you want to be." She might look nice dirty, now that I was considering it. It would be an excellent excuse to draw her into a river with me so I could wash her clean again.

"Well, what I want doesn't seem to matter. The angels only care about *him*." She sighed, scowling at that bloody dirt they were all so keen to have her lie in. "It doesn't matter now, though. They'll make him a new wife, and I'll die out here. He said so himself. Then, I'll be lying in the dirt anyway, and I won't get to be a mother on top of it."

"I wouldn't let you die." I nodded to the soil at her feet. She had pretty feet, just like the rest of her. Small and delicate. Elegant, too. "I don't want you to be in the dirt either."

"I don't care what you want." She turned her chin up and made a point of not looking at me. There was something proud and haughty about the way she held herself in that moment that made me reconsider this whole dirt business for a moment.

Maybe she'd like it better if I pinned her against it. She wouldn't have to be quiet about it. The noises she made when she was crying softly were so beautiful, I imagined she'd make even more beautiful noises if she could be loud.

“You really hate me that much, do you? I could offer you so many gorgeous things, love. Given your current options—lying in the dirt or dying in it—this doesn’t seem like a time to go looking a gift horse in the mouth.”

Slowly, she glanced back at me. Curious, but wary. “What’s a gift horse?”

I laughed, surprised. “I don’t actually know.”

I could tell she didn’t mean to. She tried to hide it behind her hand, just like her tears, but I saw. I heard it.

She laughed as well.

“I can’t afford to trust you, Lucifer,” she explained when she’d finally tucked her smile away again. She hadn’t done a very good job of it, though. It still lingered in her eyes, sparkling like stars. “You’re the first Fallen. The Great Deceiver. Father of Sin.”

“Am I now?” I took another step closer. It seemed the angels had given me a few more exciting new names while I’d been busy raising Hell. “I don’t think I’m father of anything. Not yet, anyway.” Another step closer. “But maybe you could change that.”

“What?” She moved her foot backward, like she was finally considering running, but her other foot didn’t follow. “How?”

“Make me one,” I suggested. “And I’ll make you a mother. We can try this *mating* thing together—and I’ll let you have me however you want.”

“You’re lying again,” she countered immediately. “They say that’s all you do. Lie.”

“What do I have to lie about?” I held my arms open wide, palms facing her so she could see I wasn’t hiding anything within them. “Even if I wanted to lie to you, I don’t know what the point would be. If you choose to trust me, you should do so with full knowledge. No tricks. No lies. And I certainly wouldn’t lie about sex.”

“Sex?”

“Mating. Whatever you want to call it.” I traded my smirk for a warm, come-hither smile. “But if *I* was to decide how it should be done, I think I’d make sure it was pleasurable. Comforting. Warm.” I looked her body up and down again. Her smooth stomach. The golden curls over her womanhood. My cock stiffened even more against the fastenings of my trousers just from staring at her. Perfection. “You’re naked, you know. You’d be warmer if you had clothes on, like I do.”

She shivered like she'd only just realized how cold the place outside Paradise truly was.

Shivering looked beautiful on her too. I imagined most things always would.

"I don't know what *naked* is. Or *clothes*, for that matter." She nodded to my trousers and shirt. "Are they what you're wearing?"

"Do you like them?"

"No." She looked away from me again, but a second later, she seemed unable to help herself. She glanced back. "I think you should take them off."

"Of course. That's part of what I invented them for." I stripped out of my shirt and undid my trousers immediately. Those, I didn't mind leaving lying in the dirt. "There. Now we're both naked. This is my body. I'm showing it to you, not because I have to, or because I don't have any other choice. I'm showing it to you because I want you to see me. That's fair, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said after a long moment. I could tell she was trying to look away from me, but her eyes were locked on my body too completely. My chest, then the muscles of my abs, and finally, my thick, hard cock. She couldn't tear her gaze from my form. I didn't want her to. "Yes, it is." She bit her lip. "If we did mate—"

"We really should, I think."

"Do you think it would be wrong?"

Slowly, I tilted my jaw down and narrowed my eyes. "The angels didn't teach you that? Right from wrong?"

I was beginning to think this *idiot* word I'd come up with had uses beyond Lilith's useless husband.

"I don't know anything." She looked suddenly vulnerable. Maybe even afraid. "They hardly told me anything at all."

"I could teach you," I offered. Another step closer. Soon, she'd be close enough to me to touch. "I wouldn't mind."

"And why would you do that?" Her gaze was still on me. Hungry, just like mine.

I was beginning to suspect that with enough knowledge, we might be very similar indeed.

Maybe even—dare I hope?—maybe one and the same.

“Because you deserve to know things.” A final step towards her. “Because if you don’t know right from wrong, or good from evil, then how can you choose what to be?”

“I don’t know.” Finally, she managed to look away from me again. It had taken her long enough.

I reached for her hair, and though she stiffened at my touch, when I rubbed that golden color between my fingers, she didn’t swat me away.

Didn’t ask me to stop, either.

“When I found you here, behind these bushes, I think you were hiding, Lilith.”

“I wasn’t,” she insisted, but she didn’t sound sure.

“You were. You were keeping yourself hidden because you felt shame, and you didn’t even know why.” I let her hair slip from my fingers and moved my hand to her cheek. A gamble, but one I was more than interested enough to make without fear. “You don’t know what you want because you don’t know how to choose for yourself. But I could give you that. The power of choice.”

I could give her the entire world beyond Paradise. I could give her so, so much more.

“And if I accepted this offer... then what?”

I smiled. “You could decide if you wanted to be a mother. You could decide if you wanted to mate with me or not.”

“And what will you take from me if I say yes?”

Ah. There she was. Clever thing. She hardly knew *nothing*, or else she wouldn’t have asked at all.

She knew that all gifts came with a price.

“Something small,” I said, moving my thumb across her cheek. Maybe I was imagining it, but it felt like she was leaning into the warmth of my touch. “You don’t have much right now, and I’d hate to take what little you have.”

“Something... small.” She sounded like she was at least toying with the idea.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Something I could easily give back to you.”

“But then I’d owe you one,” she pointed out.

My smile widened by a fraction. “You might find that you enjoy being in my debt.”

She licked her lips again. Hungry. Always hungry. I liked the way it looked.

I'd like it even better if she licked my lips instead.

"I guess I wouldn't know until you showed me." Slowly, she nodded. "I'm tired of not knowing things. It makes me afraid, and I'm tired of being afraid."

"Then I'll make sure you don't have to be afraid anymore either," I promised, pressing my thumb to her cheek. When I moved the pad of my thumb away, there was a pale, small starburst on her skin. My mark.

Mine.

"I'd like that," she said softly. "So... what's your price?"

"A kiss," I said, just as softly. "Only one. And I'll give it right back."

She blinked at me. "What's a kiss?"

I wrapped my arms around her. "I'll show you. It will be your first lesson."

Then, nice and slow so she could track my movements, I turned her mouth up toward mine and greedily claimed her lips.

It was a kiss that lasted for decades. It was a kiss that lasted for no time at all.

It was one hell of a thing, and so was she.

When we finally pulled away from each other, there was a smile on her pretty mouth.

"Oh," she breathed, looking at me with a new light in her eyes. "I think I understand now."

"Are you sure?"

"I think so," she murmured, leaning toward me again. Her eyes closed again. "I think it's wrong to be with you."

"I'm sure it is."

"I think I want it anyway."

"Do you? Are you sure?" My entire body felt something so new and so right, even I couldn't entirely tell.

"Help me decide," she whispered. "Kiss me again?"

I did, of course, but I also knew I didn't have to.

I'd given her the full knowledge of good and evil in that first kiss, as far as I understood it myself.

The second kiss was just the beginning of mating. An answer.

A promise.

She could choose things for herself now.
And she'd chosen me.
She'd chosen sin.

EVIE

The memory of our first meeting still lingered pleasantly in my mind as Luke and I made our way to the Bellagio's elevator.

I might have been naked when he found me, freshly created and crying outside Eden, but Luke certainly made sure I dressed well now.

"Are you sure you're going to be able to walk okay?" I asked from beneath his arm. He was draped over the shoulders of my red Versace cocktail dress, leaning on me just enough that I could tell he was struggling to keep his feet.

"Funny," said Luke. He wore a suit from the same designer, cut in white. His eyes were smiling, but they looked more sunken than usual. Beneath their glimmering, he looked tired, too. "After the way you just took my cock, I was about to ask you the same thing."

"Very funny." Truth be told, Luke *had* left me a little sore. Not that I minded. "It's good to know that you've always been a charmer. Even from the beginning."

Seeing myself in Eden through Luke's memory had certainly been eye-opening. It was equal parts touching and thrilling, to know how much he'd wanted me. Even from our first meeting.

Even before he'd ever spoken to me at all.

"I was clumsier back then," Luke said with a harsh laugh. "Too cocky. I was lucky the only other man on the entire face of the Earth was such a wanker, really. If I'd tried that gambit on you now, I imagine you would have smacked me."

“And I imagine you would have deserved it,” I said fondly. “But it’s good to know you’ve honed your pick-up skills through the years.” There was a sigh on my lips in the place of a smile, though. “I wish I didn’t know how badly all of our trysts ended up. It would have been nice to know that we managed to get a happy ending at least once.”

“Can’t have a happy ending if there’s never any ending at all.” Luke’s tone was almost wistful. For the first time since time began, we were both staring down the barrel of an ending now.

Luckily, Luke had a plan. Even if it hadn’t occurred to him until I’d forced him to think of one. It was better than nothing, though.

I’d take whatever chance we could make for ourselves at this point.

But if Luke’s plan didn’t work—if The Fourth really did take his soul and kill him for good, there wouldn’t be another go-round this time.

This time, our ending would be final. No hopes for a spin-off or a sequel. Just a hole in my life where my husband should have been.

An empty place in my bed where he’d never be again.

“Are you going to clue me in on exactly what this plan of yours is?” I asked as the elevator’s doors opened to the Bellagio’s first floor. “Or are we just going in blind?”

“I can assure you that it’s a gamble,” Luke said darkly.

I narrowed my eyes. “Is that... a pun?”

“Maybe.”

Ugh. He was incorrigible.

He was mine.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with Avarice, does it? Because you’re still an angel, Luke. If we go to the Inferno, you’ll burn.”

Luke laughed. “We’re in Vegas, love. Here, every game of chance under the sun is just a roll of the dice away.”

Luke led me into the Bellagio’s casino. Cocktail waitresses delivered drinks to bleary-eyed poker players and little old ladies played the slot machines within.

Luke’s eyes scanned the floor like he was looking for a very specific game, though.

I hoped it was a rigged one. Generally, I was against cheating, but right now, we could use all the help we could get.

Maybe if Lady Luck wasn’t on our side, Luke would simply take matters into his own hands.

“Ah. There he is.” Luke pointed to a table near the back where a massive man in an expensive suit and a motorcycle helmet was sitting in the dealer’s position, shuffling cards.

The Fourth. Ever since I’d met him, I’d considered him one of Luke’s closest personal allies... and a friend, too.

I still hadn’t forgotten the way he’d scared the Fallen out of the throne room for me. I’d always assumed that he was at least a little bit fond of Luke and me.

But I guessed that when you were besties with death, eventually that friendship was always inevitably going to come to a cold, tragic end.

When Luke and I sat down at the table, The Fourth nodded at us both like he already knew what we were here for.

“Hello, old friend.” Luke gave The Fourth a tired smirk. The Fourth didn’t say hello back. “Mind if we play a few practice rounds before we begin?”

The Fourth shrugged, which I supposed meant yes.

Luke tossed a silver coin down on the felt-top table. I didn’t recognize the markings on it—two daggers and a helmet—but it looked incredibly old.

The Fourth produced an identical coin from beneath the poker table, matching Luke’s bet.

“This is your big plan,” I whispered, catching on. The cards were crisp and springy. A fresh deck. “You’re going to gamble with death for your life.”

“A classic,” Luke confirmed. “Chess would be customary, but it looks like Azrael has chosen blackjack this time.”

“How do you play?” I asked, half embarrassed that I didn’t know.

Gambling wasn’t exactly something that I spent a lot of time thinking about. Given my luck up until this point, I didn’t really have much hope for my odds.

Winning wasn’t a very exciting concept for me. Not when you had to put something down on the table to lose first.

But if this was Luke’s last gambit, we probably didn’t have any other choice.

“It’s not hard,” Luke assured me. He tossed another coin on the table. “Deal her in. We’ll teach her. The Queen of Hell ought to know how to play cards.”

The Fourth placed another piece of silver down on the table. He dealt Luke a card, then me, then himself. His card was face up. A four. He went round again, until we all had two cards. The Fourth's second card was face down, tucked beneath his four.

I lifted my cards up from the felt to look at them. A nine and a queen.

"I don't know what these mean," I admitted to Luke.

"Let me see." He lifted my cards up as well, then nodded. "The nine is face value. The queen counts as a ten. Add them together and you get—"

"Nineteen," I said, glad I could at least do basic math.

"Good girl. The goal is twenty-one, so you're close—but sometimes close is dangerous. Here—look at mine as well."

Luke had a five and a nine. Fourteen altogether.

"So, whoever's closest to twenty-one between the three of us wins?" The Fourth only had a measly four, so even if he got a ten, he'd only have the same score as Luke.

Maybe it was a good omen?

Luke chuckled. "No. Now, we decide if we want a third card." He tapped the table, looking to The Fourth. "Hit me."

The Fourth dealt Luke another card. Luke showed it to me—a seven. Now, Luke had twenty-one.

"Interesting." If I wanted to do the same, I'd need what? A two? There were only four of those in the deck, which I supposed meant my chances of getting one were low. "What happens if you go over twenty-one?"

"It's called a bust," said Luke. He let his eyes slide down to my breasts, which were pushed up high with cleavage peeking out from beneath the neckline of my dress. "Unfortunately, unlike yours, it's bad thing. You automatically lose."

"I think I'll skip the third card, then."

"Good choice," agreed Luke. He looked to The Fourth. "She'll stand." His gaze trailed back to me. "That means you want to end your turn without taking a hit."

"Got it." I nodded to The Fourth's four. "What about his hand?"

"All you have to do to win is beat it," said Luke.

The Fourth flipped over his second card, a nine. He took two more hits—a three, then a two.

That left his total at eighteen. One less than mine, three less than Luke's.

The Fourth pushed his two coins our way, then swept up all of our cards.

We'd won.

"That was... kind of fun, actually," I said softly. Maybe this wouldn't be so hard after all.

"It's always fun when you're winning," said Luke. "Let's play a few more rounds before we get down to business, eh?"

The Fourth obliged him. On the second round, Luke and I both lost. Aces could be ones or elevens, I learned, but the dealer's first ace always counted as the latter unless it busted the hand. His second card was a king.

The coins we'd just won went back to The Fourth.

"I see what you mean now," I said with a frown. "Losing is decidedly less fun."

"If I survive this, I'll teach you how to count cards next," Luke promised with a wink. The glimmer in his eyes was dimming, though. We both knew well that it was a promise he might not be able to make good on. "It makes losing much more satisfying."

As The Fourth gathered up the cards this time, he switched out the decks.

A glance to Luke told me we weren't practicing anymore.

This was the real deal.

The Fourth's new deck looked almost as old as the coins were, though I suspected that wasn't possible. They were thin, chipped at the edges like mice had nibbled on them, and well-worn. The backs of the cards were swirled with black and white filigree. When The Fourth shuffled them, I saw a flickering skull appear within the cards as they folded together.

This was it, then. The moment of truth.

"Sit back, love." Luke took the back of my skull in his hand and pulled my lips to his for a kiss. I knew it might be one of our last. "This one is all me."

Luke pocketed his coins and brushed his fingertips against his chest through the split in his button-down. He looked paler than ever now. As his fingers moved against his chest, his brow furrowed and his face fell.

"Fuck." He looked at The Fourth. "I didn't realize how far gone I was. *Fuck.*"

I didn't know what Luke had been looking for, but The Fourth didn't seem dissuaded by Luke's inability to find it.

He merely turned to me and slid a card my way.

“No,” Luke said firmly, but The Fourth had already reached into his own chest and pulled out a white poker chip.

It was black around its edges, like it had been a different color once. The Fourth placed the chip down on the table, and Luke pounded his fist against the felt in return.

“No,” Luke said again. His lips were snarled. “Not her. Not like this. If you already have me, then take me. I’m not losing her as well.”

I glanced between them as they stared each other down. Luke’s face was sharp with fury. The Fourth just looked expectant, as always.

But beneath his helmet, though I couldn’t see his eyes, I somehow knew they’d shifted from Luke onto me.

My fingers brushed against my own sternum with a mind of their own. By the time I realized what I was doing, I’d already pulled something glowing and golden out from somewhere deep within me.

Another poker chip. This one created its own sunshiny light as I placed it down.

“Evie, *no!*” Luke grabbed my wrist and pulled my hand away. My entire body followed, swiveling to face him. “I won’t let you play for me. I’m finished. I’m done.”

“I’m not giving up on you,” I told him, setting my jaw and raising my chin. “I promised you I wasn’t losing you again. And I won’t.”

“You have our child to think of too now, Evie.” Luke’s eyes were sunken and full of pain. His grip on my wrist, initially so harsh and firm, was weakening by the second.

He was dying, and I knew it.

But I had one last trick up my sleeve. One that I’d been quietly mulling over ever since my wedding to Luke. When we’d kissed, we’d been bathed in golden light. Luke said it reminded him of the love of the Almighty.

Now, I glowed with it too—and so did the chip, which I was beginning to suspect represented my soul.

“I know what I’m doing, Luke.” I moved my hand to his face so I could stroke his quickly hollowing cheek. “Don’t worry. You don’t need to.”

“Don’t need to?” Luke spat at me. “You’ve only just learned how to play!”

“It’s our only option.” I searched for the flame in my belly and found it flickering brighter than ever. “Let me do this. Don’t argue with me. You can’t stop me.”

“Like hell I can’t,” Luke shot back at me. “Remember our vows, love? You promised to obey. I forbid you from doing this.”

I gave him a sad smile. “And that night you left me to go to Heaven, I forbade you from leaving. You still went.”

The vows we’d made to each other had been powerful ones.

But there was something even more powerful in the works here.

Luke’s plan had taken a detour, but in its place, a different plan had arisen.

One that wouldn’t be denied.

“Please,” Luke pleaded. “Think of our child. If you lose, you both die.”

“I know.” I closed my eyes and pressed my lips to his. “So I’m not going to lose.”

“It’s fucking *blackjack*, Evie!” Luke snapped. “You don’t just get to decide whether you lose or win!”

“I guess not,” I said with a shrug. “Call it a leap of faith.”

I pushed my chip forward, and The Fourth continued to deal me in.

My first card was that two I’d needed earlier. My second was an ace. Anything more than that, though, and things could get dicey fast.

I had either a thirteen or a three. If I took a hit and got an eight, I’d win immediately.

In front of The Fourth, an eight was already on the table.

That lowered my chances of getting one, I knew.

I tapped the table anyway.

“Hit me,” I said, and The Fourth gave me another card.

Seven. *Damn*. It was a hard hand to beat, but if The Fourth managed to get his own cards to twenty-one, I’d lose anyway.

Desperately, I wished I knew what that card beneath his eight was.

But before I found out, I’d need to decide whether to hit again, or stay.

“Evie,” Luke warned.

I knew he wanted me to stay.

But I wanted him to stay too. And I wasn’t going to settle for anything less than certainty.

I closed my eyes and found that flicker of flame again. It felt warm and comforting. Encouraging, even.

I won't let you die, I told it in my mind. We're going to be a family. Me and your father and you.

When I opened my eyes again, my coin on the table was glowing even brighter with golden light.

That was even more encouraging still.

"Hit me," I said again.

"Evie!" Luke roared in anger. When his eyes met mine, they were full of broken glass, dull and colorless. Their pale blue had faded away.

"I'm sorry," I told him. I wasn't sorry for what I'd done, but I was sorry for upsetting him. "Please, though. Trust me."

He could yell at me all he liked.

He had his anger. I had my faith.

As The Fourth gave me yet another card, I tried to brace myself for failure. I couldn't quite manage it, though.

I knew the card was an ace before it even turned over.

Twenty-one.

Luke's chest heaved with relief, but I knew we weren't quite done.

If the Fourth got a twenty-one as well, we'd only have a draw. I didn't know what would happen then.

Probably, we'd have to play again.

And as much faith as I had in that moment, I wasn't eager to push my luck that far.

All but one of the aces was on the table now. Since the dealer's first ace had to be an eleven unless it broke the hand, with The Fourth's eight, that made nineteen.

I wondered whether he would take another card or not. If he didn't, he'd lose automatically.

I had a bad feeling that The Fourth couldn't help but play to win.

He needed a two. Anything more than that, and he'd bust his hand.

There was a two on the table already in my hand. That lowered his chances of getting one, but there were still three more in the deck. One of them could come up at any time.

The Fourth took the hit.

As he turned his card over, my chest cracked with joy.

The fourth ace. It would count as a one. That left The Fourth with a total of twenty, and since all the aces were out on the table now, he had no hopes of getting a twenty-one.

I still couldn't see The Fourth's face from behind his helmet, but somehow, I got the sense that he was smiling at me.

I still didn't really know why. He'd lost, and I'd won.

"Oh, fuck me," Luke groaned with relief. He folded his body over the table, resting his head in his arms. "Jesus, God, and the Holy fucking Spirit. Fuck *me*."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd prefer to be the only one fucking you, handsome." I turned his face toward me, lifting it up from the table so I could see the look in his eyes.

The broken glass was still there, but the blue had started to return as well.

"You did it," he whispered.

"I did." I smiled and placed a kiss on his nose. "Aren't you proud?"

"I'd bloody well have to be." He still looked like he was struggling to believe it. "Are you sure you've never played this before?"

I laughed. Genuinely. "Of course I haven't." If I had, it would have been one hell of a bluff. "Maybe I just had a very good teacher."

"Somehow, I doubt that." Luke wrapped me up in his arms and squeezed me tight. I wasn't sure that he was ever going to let go.

I wasn't sure that I wanted to.

But then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw The Fourth push the white chip with black edges toward us.

"Thank you," I told him.

He merely nodded, picked up his deck, and walked away.

His game was done.

"Let's put this back in you." I picked up the white chip. "Unless you're enjoying slowly withering away in a Vegas casino?"

"Not a damn bit." Luke picked up my gold chip with one hand and cupped my jaw with the other.

We pressed the chips back into each other as our lips met.

Once again, though I didn't know whether Luke could see it or not, I felt that golden light flow all around us.

Like the Almighty Himself was smiling down on us. *Thy will be done.*

"Thank you, darling girl," Luke whispered against my lips as our kiss finally broke. "That was truly something else."

"It was, wasn't it?" A smile tugged at my lips as I took in his face again. His skin was glowing once more. His eyes were piercing blue. He

looked healthy. Whole.

Completely healed.

“So, what’s next?” I asked.

“Nothing.” Luke took my hand as he rose from the table. “We lie low. We stay together. We wait.”

“But...” As amazing as that sounded, it was almost a little too good to be true. “Are you sure? The angels are still going to be after you. Shouldn’t we... make a new plan or something?”

“The angels don’t know where we are, love.” Luke pulled my hand to his lips and kissed it. “And don’t think I didn’t see all that golden glowing surrounding you when you put my soul back.”

Shyly, I smiled. “I wondered if you would.”

“The Almighty has finally decided he’s taken a liking to us.” Luke gave an uncertain sigh. “Though I don’t imagine either Heaven or Hell will ever understand why. I certainly don’t. But your faith in Him saved my life. We’re following His plan now.”

“You really think...” It was such good news, I didn’t want to jinx it by saying it out loud.

“I do,” Luke said with a nod. “Between you and the Big Man, you’ve given a gift today. I’m not going to go squandering it by getting too ambitious.”

“So, we just... stay here?” I gestured to the Bellagio’s lobby as we passed out of the casino once more. “We live here until... what, exactly?”

“Until the baby comes, love.” A grin appeared on Luke’s lips. It was so bright, I found myself grinning back at him. “You *are* still excited about it, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” I said immediately. “But...”

“But what?”

“What about the Inferno?” I asked. “What about the Fallen? What about ruling Hell?”

“Rome wasn’t built in a day,” Luke quipped. “And it will take far longer than nine months to burn down Hell. The Fallen aren’t a concern when left to their own devices. They can’t work together to save their lives, let alone achieve their ends. They’ll devolve into infighting soon, if they haven’t already. Trust me. That’s not a concern you need to have.”

“What about...” I was still searching for a catch, but I was struggling to find one.

Without Raph, my advisor, my degree was on hold indefinitely. It hardly felt like it mattered anymore, compared to the future that Luke and I had ahead of us if we were really as safe as he thought. All my classes had already been handed over to other instructors. My parents were safe. My friends were safe.

“I don’t know what we’ll do without chaos tearing us apart, I guess,” I finally said with a tiny laugh.

“Really?” Luke looked amused, if a little concerned. “We’ll watch movies together. Eat delicious food. Listen to your favorite records. Dance to them. Write poetry. Read books. We’ll *live*, Evie. Not to the full extent that I wish we could, but it will be more of a life than we’ve ever had together. You’ll give our child all the love and care it needs to grow strong inside you and I’ll pamper you like the queen you are. Is there something wrong with that?”

“No,” I said after a long moment. “That sounds perfect, actually.”

For once, nothing was wrong at all.

LUKE

I'd promised her a quiet life of pleasure while we lay low.
I took my promises seriously.
For the next seven months, that was what we had.

"What do you think?" Evie asked, slipping into the bedroom of the suite from the master bath.

She wore a bikini, cherry red, and nothing else—other than the sultry hint of a smile on her crimson lips. She posed in the doorway like a pin-up model. Her tits were full and plump beneath the halter top. Above the tiny bikini bottoms she wore, her belly was round and firm.

When I'd realized that she was pregnant, in the worst moments of my torture, I'd imagined how she might look in a moment just like this. It had seemed so impossible back then, I'd let my mind embellish and fantasize as much as it liked.

But no matter how thrilling my fantasies had gotten—fucking my perfect, pregnant wife on a sailboat in the Mediterranean, making her come for me in the salty waters of the Dead Sea—I knew in an instant that even my wildest fantasies didn't hold a candle to the reality that was her.

As soon as I laid eyes on her, my cock went abruptly and almost painfully hard.

Of all the beautiful things in the world, she was the only one who had ever made me stiff like *that*.

"You look like a fertility goddess," I murmured darkly. Already, I was undoing my belt.

“Is that what I am to you?” Evie laughed. It was the most exquisite sound I’d ever known. “A goddess?”

“Yes.” I rose from the bed and let my belt clank against my lap. My fingers moved to the button on my trousers, unfastening them. She *was* a goddess. The only altar I’d ever wanted to kneel at was her lap. “Now, take it off.”

“I thought you wanted me to model my new swimsuits for you,” she pouted. “You don’t like it?”

“I love it,” I assured her, moving closer with care. “Now take it off before I ruin it.”

Smiling, Evie untied the bows against her back and neck. Her breasts spilled out of the top. Her nipples were a darker rose color now. They seemed almost perpetually hard.

“How’s that?” she asked, dropping the top to the floor. “Do I look more or less like a goddess with my top off?”

“More,” I assured her. My zipper hissed as I pulled it down. I nodded to her bottoms next. “*More.*”

By the time they hit the floor, I had her twirled around and pressed up against the wall.

“This is no way to treat a goddess, Luke,” she teased. My hand cupped her belly protectively. She whimpered as my teeth nipped at her neck. “If I’m a goddess, I need to be worshiped. Adored.”

“I worship you.” I slipped a hand beneath her belly and between her legs. My fingers came back slick and covered in her honey. She was already wet for me. “I adore you.”

“You worship your goddess with your cock pressed against her ass, huh?”

I smiled against the nape of her neck. Her scent had always been addictive, but it was even more delicious now. Any time my body was apart from hers felt like a waste. If I couldn’t smell her, I wasn’t nearly close enough.

“Don’t you like it?” I pushed my boxers and trousers down so I could settle my cock in the valley between her ass cheeks. She was so warm—always warm. “I can stop if you want.”

Controlling myself around Evie had only gotten harder and harder during our secret vacation here in the Bellagio. I didn’t want to control myself at all anymore—but for her, I’d try.

“Oh, I like it.” She arched her back to shove her ass against my cock more firmly. Over her shoulder, she gave me a sultry glance. “I’m just not sure that’s how to pay homage to a goddess, is all.”

“Mm. Maybe not.” In a fluid motion, I bent her over against the wall and folded my body over hers. With a knee, I spread her legs apart. My cock slipped between her cheeks in an instant. Its tip settled against her soaked, hot slit. “Suppose I’ll just have to make you my whore instead.”

“Your whore?” She laughed, but there was a tremor in it that told me she’d be making other delightful sounds for me. Very soon, if I had any say in the matter. “And what would you do with me as your whore, Luke?”

“Fuck you nice and hard until you begged me to stop.” God, how I wanted her. As I felt her honey coat my tip and shaft, I wanted to do exactly that. “I’d have to get my money’s worth, wouldn’t I?”

“Mm. And what would you pay me in?”

I smirked, slipping my tongue against her neck and gripping her hip a little harder.

“Diamonds,” I whispered against her skin. I wanted her. She was dripping wet for me, pregnant with my child, naked and gorgeous and mine. Mine alone. “Gold and silver and more precious jewels than you can name or count.”

“And if I didn’t ask you to stop?”

I smiled darkly. I loved this little game we played together. Testing boundaries. Learning new things about each other all the time.

Maybe it was time to test another now.

I took my cock in my fist and dragged it upward, from wet heat of her cunt to the tight pucker of her ass.

With my other fist, I gathered up her golden hair and pulled her head back. She was already gasping. Now, she gasped harder still.

“Do you want me to stop now?” I growled, my lips against her ear.

There was a moment where I thought she might say yes. Her lovely body was trembling beneath mine. Her breaths came sharp and short.

If she did want me to stop, I would. I’d been perfectly happy with her cunt up until this point. I didn’t *need* to claim every hole.

I might like to, though.

And as she whispered, “No,” my chest rumbled with pleasure. My cock twitched and my entire body went hot with desire in an instant.

She wanted it too.

“Relax for me, darling.” She’d need to, if she was going to have me like this. My cock was long and thick, and her ass was tight enough I wasn’t sure if it could even be taken at all. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You can’t hurt me,” she promised. “I’m ready. I need it. I need you.”
God.

What a precious thing she was.

The most precious thing I’d ever known.

My hand left her hair. She wouldn’t be able to take all of me without a little help first. In the absence of lube—something that I’d pick up later if she decided this was something she enjoyed—her honey would have to do.

My fingers slipped between the lips of her pussy, gathering up slickness. I moved them to her ass and worked my fingertips around it in little circles, coating it with her own need.

She shuddered as I pressed a finger in. Just the middle one, to see how she’d take it.

As I stretched out her tight little hole, her entire body shuddered with pleasure.

It seemed she took it well. Almost too well. My cock leapt up at the sight of her reaction. My balls tensed with a need to empty themselves deep inside her.

My entire body roared with a desperation to just take her, then and there, with no more preparation.

I may have become an angel again now, but I’d been an angel right before the Fall too.

Some part of me, however great or small, would always be the Devil.

And god, how I wanted to be the Devil inside her now.

But no, she needed gentleness as much as she needed roughness from me. The things that our bodies wanted weren’t always the things that were best for them.

If it hadn’t been the case, I would have been balls deep in her ass several minutes ago, preparations be damned.

“Do you like the feel of my fingers inside you, love?” I added another as I spoke, pressing into her in slow, focused movements. When I got them deep enough that they couldn’t press any further, I moved them in a come hither motion and spread them apart slightly, stretching her out.

“I... *fuck*, Luke. You know I do.” Her knees were shaking as I withdrew my fingers.

Maybe a little too much.

“Come to bed with me then.” I raised my fingers to my lips and sucked them into my mouth. Her taste was rich and sweet. When they were clean, I took her hand and pulled her away from the wall. “Get on that mattress. On your hands and knees.”

She followed me without a word. No complaints. Her body was still shaking with anticipation. It only made her look that much more beautiful.

I stared at her for a moment from behind. My tongue rolled over my lower lip, suddenly greedy.

I wanted to fuck her so badly, I hurt for it.

But first...

“Hold still,” I ordered as I moved behind her on the bed. “Just like that. Don’t move.”

I spread her ass cheeks with my hands. She had a round, firm ass. Heart-shaped. Gorgeous. I moved my lips between the mounds of it, kissing my way to her pucker. She was still trembling, but she didn’t disobey me.

She couldn’t. And on top of it, knowing her as well as I did now, I knew she didn’t want to.

My tongue slipped against her hole, working in a circle the way my fingers had.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, love.” I pulled away only for long enough to purr the words at her. “You taste incredible.”

Then, I dove right back in.

My tongue pressed into her. I forced it through her tight ring, twisting it until she was gasping for me again. With every flick of it, I could feel her cunt throbbing for me in response.

I pumped my cock in my fist while I claimed her with my tongue. I wanted more than just a taste. Soon, I knew, I’d have it.

She was tense still, but the more I licked at her, the more she eased into the sensation.

Slowly, her gasps turned to whimpers. By the time I finally withdrew my tongue again, her whimpers had turned into coos of delight.

“Do you still want it?” I asked, moving my cock to her ass again.

“More than ever,” she purred back.

And now that she was ready, I had no reason to hold myself back.

I forced my tip inside first. The heat of her was incredible. She was fire, searing and bright. Her ass clenched around my shaft as soon as I was inside, sucking me in deeper still.

With every thrust, her heat engulfed me more and more. It was vibrant and visceral and so tight it nearly took my breath away. My heart pounded hard against my chest as I sank half of my length into her, then three-quarters, then—fucking perfectly—the whole thing, all at once.

“Luke,” she whimpered, full of need.

I folded my body over hers, wrapping my arms around her. I knew exactly what she needed.

She needed me.

“Take me,” I told her. I moved an arm around her ribs and another around her chest, pulling her up so her back was clutched firmly against my chest. “Feel me.”

“I am.” Her voice was shaky and drenched in ecstasy. “I do.”

I took her nipple between the fingers of one hand, pinching and teasing it while I fucked her until she cried out. It only made me want more.

With one arm, I held her. With the other, I caressed her body with a hunger I’d only felt when she was near. I squeezed her breast, let my fingertips roam over the roundness of her belly. I clutched her throat in my palm, gently tightening, then moved my fingers to her clit, stroking it rapidly while my cock plunged into these new depths quick and hard enough to make me sick with pleasure, dizzy with it.

“Yes. Good.” My eyes glinted darkly one last time. I was close enough now that I could let loose inside her at any moment. But I didn’t want to reach that peak of ecstasy alone. Like with everything else, it was always better if she joined me there. “Now, Evie—are you listening to me?”

“Yes,” she panted, leaning her head back to rest it against my shoulder. “Always.”

I bared my teeth in a growl. “Come for me. Come around my fucking cock, you perfect creature. You exquisite thing.” Her body shuddered, ready to obey, and I pressed down on her clit harder as my balls began to tense. “Come!”

And she did. She came gloriously, moaning and whimpering and crying out to the Heavens with pleasure that I felt in the way she throbbed around me and shook against me and reached back to take my hair into her fists so

she had something to hold onto through the sensations wracking her body like rogue waves.

It was intense and beautiful. Something completely unhinged and all our own.

I met her in that pleasure with a roar of my own. My cum churned in my balls, rushed up through my shaft and exploded from my tip, shooting inside her like a geyser buried so deep that for a moment I struggled to know where I ended and she began.

When it was finally done—I wasn't sure that the moment would ever end—we collapsed on the mattress together, sweating and rolling and kissing and laughing. My eyes met hers and found grays that sparkled with so much light, I'd write poetry about it in the days to come.

She was goddess and whore and queen and demon.

She was a storm, and I would brave her rain and lightning a thousand times over just to feel the peace I found in that moment again.

She was my love. My wife. The other half of my soul.

I held her in my arms, completely exhausted and intensely happy, until we both fell asleep with our lips against each other's in a kiss that we shared even in our dreams.

EVIE

As we walked into the waiting room of the doctor's office for my checkup, Luke kept his arm around my waist. His eyes scanned the room, searching for danger.

Behind my Elvis glasses, so did mine.

"Do you see anything?" He dipped down to whisper in my ear. "Angels? Demons? Anything else?"

"Nothing," I said. There were no auras in the waiting room. Just normal human women with normal human babies.

It was a relief.

"Good." Luke helped me sit down in a chair in the corner, then went to check me in.

My feet ached and my back was sore, but I was happy. I was happier than I'd ever been in my entire life. Apparently, all it took was seven months in a luxury suite with Luke pampering me to make me shimmer with joy. We hadn't gotten bored of each other. I wasn't even stir crazy. All we did all day was read and fuck and enjoy each other, and that was perfect.

If anything, it was leaving the apparent safety of the Bellagio for these appointments that was the biggest stress in my life. And either Luke was slowly developing agoraphobia... or it unsettled him too.

We hadn't been attacked while we were out in the open like this, but every time we ventured beyond the little world we'd made together, we always knew there was a chance that we wouldn't be so lucky this time.

“Got your paperwork.” Luke waved a clipboard in his hand as he sat down next to me. “I’ll fill it out quick, then they say they’re ready for us.”

“I think I can fill out my own paperwork this time, Luke,” I said with a laugh. Luke had been insistent on taking care of everything for me lately. Even checking off boxes for preexisting conditions, as it turned out.

“I know you can. But why should you have to?”

I shrugged. There was no use arguing with him.

Really, it was kind of sweet.

“Are you excited for the ultrasound?” Luke asked as he filled out my name. I liked how his handwriting looked, dark and masculine.

I liked how my first name looked next to his last.

“Always. But I’m nervous, too.” I hugged myself and cuddled a little tighter to his arm. He wore a dark t-shirt that really made his biceps pop. They were nice to rest against. So was he.

“Nervous?” Luke looked up from the paperwork. “About what?”

“What if the ultrasound comes out with our baby sporting horns and a tail?”

Luke chuckled. “There won’t be horns. Or a tail, either.”

“How do you know?”

“I still remember when Mal and Don were born. Both full demons, mind.” Luke sucked the end of the pen between his lips for a moment, then went back to filling out my details on the clipboard. “They both came out looking perfectly normal. You don’t need to worry about *that*.”

“Well... good.” I gave a little sigh of relief. “And you don’t think when the baby grows up, it’s going to start murdering its nannies and making birds break their necks against the windowpanes?”

Luke snorted. “When we watched *The Omen*, I warned you it wouldn’t be like that.”

“Still.” I moved my hands to cradle my belly. The little flame inside it was growing bigger and stronger with every passing day. “This baby feels like... like someone important. Is that silly? I guess every mother probably feels like that.”

Luke finished off the paperwork, then turned to me with a gentle smile.

“I think our child could bring great change to the world, love. Change that it needs. We’ll raise it to be sweet and noble and kind, just like their mother.” His eyes glimmered wickedly. “And to dispatch their enemies with all of my fury, too.”

“How many enemies could a baby possibly have?” I asked—but then I remembered who Luke was, and who I was. “Oh. Wait. Never mind.”

“Most importantly, we’ll raise this baby with love,” said Luke. “That’s all that any parent can do.”

“We don’t even know where we’re going to raise him or her at all, though.” Luke still couldn’t come back to Hell. Neither of us was safe in Heaven. And as nice as the last seven months had been, the Bellagio on the Vegas Strip was hardly a place to raise a child.

“We’ll figure it out,” Luke said. “We always do.”

From the door to the exam rooms, a nurse called my name. Luke helped me up from my chair and guided me to her. He handed off my chart with a charming smile.

“Everything is looking good,” the nurse told us after she’d taken my blood pressure and a few other vitals. “All that’s left is the ultrasound. The two of you still want to keep the sex of the baby a surprise, right?”

“I think it’ll be a boy,” Luke said. He gave my hand a kiss. “Evie says girl.”

“We’re waiting until he or she is born until we find out,” I told the nurse. “That way, if Luke is right, he’ll be too excited to be smug about it and I’ll be too doopy and exhausted to smack him if he starts saying *I told you so*.”

The nurse laughed. “First child, right?”

I nodded.

Part of me was even beginning to hope it wouldn’t be our last.

The nurse smiled at the screen when she did the ultrasound. “This is going to be one cute baby. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say they just winked at me.” She looked between Luke and me. “Not possible, of course.”

“No,” Luke agreed earnestly. He gave me a sly wink when the nurse looked away. “Of course not.”

“And it still looks healthy?” I asked. *No tail? No horns?*

“Perfectly,” the nurse assured me. She wiped the ultrasound gel from my belly and moved the machine aside. “Absolutely nothing to worry about. I’ll send the doctor in, then the two of you should be free to go.”

The nurse left us alone together. Luke gave my hand a squeeze as he stared up at me from his chair.

“Relieved?”

“No horns, no tail,” I said with a shrug. “I’ll take it.”

“Mm. And when we get back to the Bellagio, I’ll take—”

Luke’s voice cut off abruptly as the door opened again.

I was expecting Dr. Peters, my OB/GYN, but the man who came through the door couldn’t have been more different from the kind-faced elderly woman who’d been monitoring me through this pregnancy.

Immediately, any relief I’d felt dissipated.

Now, the only feeling left inside me was the intense, urgent need to run.

“Well. Fancy seeing the two of you here.” Michael wore a lab coat and a name tag like he was really part of the medical staff here, but if he was a doctor, I was a fucking saint. “Congratulations on the baby, by the way. Sorry I didn’t send a card.”

“Leave.” Luke rose to his feet and put his body between Michael’s and my own. Already, he held balls of celestial light in his hands. He was ready to fight.

So was I.

I flicked my fingers out, conjuring infernal flames of my own.

“Calm down.” Michael spoke like Luke and I were the ones who were being unreasonable. His tone would have been laughable if, beneath my anger, I hadn’t been so afraid. “I’m not here to hurt you. I’m here to talk.”

“Forgive me if I find that hard to believe,” Luke growled. His chest rose and fell heavily. I had no doubt his heart was racing, flushed with adrenaline. “The last time you and I had a little chat, you were carving tally marks into my chest with cursed steel blades.”

Luke was right to doubt Michael. I couldn’t imagine the pain that he’d been through at Michael’s hands. But I’d seen the aftermath. Every wound that Michael had inflicted on him, I’d had to heal.

“A necessary punishment for your crimes against Heaven,” Michael said dismissively. “I’m not here to talk about old wounds, adversary—though I do wonder how you were able to heal them all, I have to admit. Frankly, I was surprised to learn you were alive at all. When you were taken from Paradise, I was certain your soul was forfeit. Or is death slacking on collecting his dues now?”

“We had a good turn of luck.” Luke didn’t back down. The light in his hands only sizzled hotter. “If you want to talk, talk. But know that my

patience with you is running thin. I may not be able to kill you here, but I can certainly make you hurt.”

“I’ll be brief, then.” Michael shrugged as he strode into the room. “I’m here to talk about the child.” He turned his gaze to my belly, then met my eyes. “You have realized what will happen if it’s born, haven’t you?”

“Archangel,” Luke snarled, low and with warning.

Michael laughed cruelly. “Oh, no. He hasn’t told you about the prophecy yet, has he?”

“Prophecy?” I looked at Luke, but he couldn’t risk taking his eyes off Michael right now. “No... is there one?”

“The son of Satan will bring about the end of days. Surely, you’ve watched enough movies and read enough books to have heard that one before, Evelyn.” Michael clicked his tongue at me, shaking his head. “Quite ignorant of you if you haven’t, really.”

“I’m hardly Satan anymore,” Luke snapped back at Michael. “And you’ve twisted those words to suit your own narrative.”

“Has he?” I let the flames fade from my hands and pressed a palm to Luke’s shoulder. “What does the prophecy say?”

“Only that any child of mine will be the source of great change,” said Luke. He sounded certain. “It doesn’t say anything about good or evil. He’s lying.”

“I’m not,” Michael said simply. He sounded just as sure as Luke. “Come back to Heaven with me and I’ll show you the scrolls myself.”

“Yeah, that’s not gonna happen.” I stared Michael down over Luke’s shoulder. Luke had never given me a reason not to trust him. Michael had never given me a reason to trust him at all. “Who made this prophecy? Where did these scrolls come from?”

And why were they so concerned with my baby? A child that wouldn’t even be born for two more months?

“A set of scrolls were delivered to Hell not long after the Fall,” Luke said over his shoulder to me. “The other Fallen had only recently picked their way across the Earth and reconvened. You and I had already fallen in love.” He glared daggers at Michael. “The same set of scrolls was delivered to the angels. Michael’s been using the predictions written in them to justify hunting you down ever since. Never could accept the idea of change, could you?”

“Because they’re true, adversary.” Michael’s temper flared up at Luke’s suggestion. “The world needs order. You and your Lilith upend it. The prophecy is *very* clear on that matter. The son of the adversary and a human woman will plunge the Earth into chaos and bring about its end.” Michael turned his gaze to me. “Is that baby in your belly worth that? You’ll lose everything you love here on Earth. Everyone, too.”

“He’s *lying*.” Luke’s lips pulled back to bare his teeth. “Don’t listen to him, Evie. He’s trying to manipulate you. You know I love the Earth as much as you do. I wouldn’t do anything to put it in jeopardy. Destroying the world would hurt you too much.”

“I believe you,” I said.

I did.

“Then once again, you’ve fallen prey to yet another falsehood from the Father of Lies himself.” Michael shook his head patronizingly. “You really aren’t a very clever girl. Never have been, I suppose.”

“Then I s’pose I’m lucky I’m so pretty.” I fought back an eye roll.

This was the person who’d repeatedly destroyed my life over the entire course of human history, after all. I didn’t care if Michael thought I was clever or not.

“I didn’t come here to argue with the two of you either,” Michael said with a heavy sigh. “If you need proof, you only have to turn on the news at this point. You *have* been watching the news, haven’t you?”

Luke and I exchanged a brief glance.

We really hadn’t.

We’d been a little busy doing other things—like living the life we’d been denied through every other reincarnation cycle. For the last seven months, Luke and I had been in our own little world with little contact to the outside. We’d been happy with it.

After thousands of years of fighting angels and fate, watching the news had been the last thing on our minds.

“Typical,” Michael scoffed. “Then allow me to fill you in. There’s peace on the West Bank.”

“And that’s a problem for you?” As much as I knew Michael despised me, it was hard to believe that the angels really had an issue with the general idea of something like *peace*, for fuck’s sake.

“And talk of war breaking out in Canada,” Michael added. “The world is being turned on its head. It has been, ever since the child was conceived.

And if this is what the baby is doing to the fabric of reality while it's still in the womb, imagine what it will do once it's born. Once it's grown."

"It's just a baby," I insisted. "It's not *doing* anything yet. Let alone manipulating geo-politics."

"If that's what you need to tell yourself," said Michael. "But you're wrong."

"I'm not letting you kill our child, Michael." Luke's hand reached for mine. I squeezed his fingers tight. "You're the one who's wrong. Once again, you're just trying to justify your own hatred for us. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Honestly, killing babies doesn't really seem like Heaven's style."

"You're right on that count, at least," Michael allowed. "I don't want to kill the child. But when it's born, you need to understand that the baby must be taken to Heaven. As an innocent, it won't be harmed there. It can be raised by the angels in a place where it won't be able to harm the Earth—and Evelyn must be rendered infertile, so this won't happen again."

"No," Luke and I said in unison.

Luke added a solid, "And fuck you for suggesting it," for emphasis, too.

"What about this are the two of you not understanding? Has love really rendered you so blind?" Michael paced the room in front of us, bristling with frustration. "You've painted me the villain in your narrative. I understand why. But through all these years of bloodshed, I've only been trying to prevent *this*." He gestured wide. "My job is to maintain balance on Earth. Upheaval on this level will tear apart this realm you both claim to love so much." He met my gaze, then Luke's. His eyes were shining with something genuine for once. "I love it too, believe it or not. I don't want to see it end because a fallen angel and silly human insisted on having a child together. Not when there's a simple solution to stop it. I'm begging you both—see reason here. You don't have to like it, but you can't just close your eyes to reality. No love is worth this kind of loss."

For a moment, I almost believed him. Or, at least, I believed that *he* believed what he was doing was right.

But through so many of my lifetimes, all Luke and I had known was loss.

Would Luke really have continued to fight for us if he'd known that winning would bring about the end of everything else?

No. He wouldn't have. I knew him better than that.

"Your sincerity is endearing, Michael. But you forget—I've read the same prophecy that you have," Luke said after a moment of silence. "I don't know why you insist on twisting it. Change isn't destruction. It's only change. Think of all the suffering that's happened in this world since its inception. Murder and war and atrocities beyond measure. Hasn't it ever struck you that change is exactly what Earth needs?"

Slowly, Michael shook his head. "I can tell that you're not going to see reason. So let me offer you this instead. You held Evelyn against her will in the Inferno on the morning after your wedding. Your end of our great bargain has been forfeited since that moment."

"A technicality," Luke scoffed. "She only wanted to leave because you had one of your agents steal her memory, you bastard. She didn't know what was at stake."

"And when Raphael attacked Evelyn at her coronation, our end of the deal was broken as well," Michael went on, disregarding Luke's words completely. "Humans on Earth can be harmed by angels and demons alike now. I have no interest in harming a pregnant woman—and Evelyn is hardly human anymore, anyway. But..." Michael's eyes glinted darkly.

I swallowed hard. I knew where this was going. I didn't like it.

"You're going to try to harm the people that Evie loves," Luke guessed. "How typical of you. And you call *me* the evil one."

"What are the lives of a few humans compared to the billions of lives that will be lost when that child ends the world?" Michael shrugged. "I only do what I must. If that means killing off Evelyn's friends and family members one by one until I know the Earth is safe..."

"We'll fight back." Rage welled up within me as the fire in my womb crackled, angry and hot. My parents—Bea, Ava and Joan—they hadn't done anything wrong. They were innocent in all of this too. "Target them, and we'll make you pay."

"I'm sure you'll try." Michael snorted. "You know, this would have all been so much easier if you'd just let Azrael take you both. I'm still not sure how you managed it, honestly. You were supposed to lose. Your failure to do so created an inconvenience for me. One that will cost you dearly, I'm afraid."

"I won Luke's soul back honestly," I insisted. "Unless..."

I wondered how Michael even knew of our card game at all.

“You engineered that, didn’t you?” asked Luke. “That’s why you let me be taken from Paradise. You knew it doomed me, and you knew Evie would gamble with her own soul to try to save me.”

“Azrael must have realized the deck my agents planted for him was stacked. Pity. He switched it out for his own, didn’t he?”

I remembered the way The Fourth had changed decks right before we’d played the round of cards that had let me win Luke’s soul back.

He had.

Part of me wondered if The Fourth hadn’t stacked that deck himself.

“Ah, it doesn’t matter now, I suppose,” Michael said when neither of us answered him. “I’ll give you a day to think all of this over. I hope you use it to think long and hard about all you have to lose if you refuse this offer. Tomorrow night, you’ll meet me outside the Inferno. Either to agree to give me that child in your belly when its born...” Michael nodded to my baby bump. Beneath my skin, my womb felt full of wildfire, ready for a fight. “Or we make war all over again. Just like we’ve always done in the past. And as in the past—Heaven will prevail.”

“Not this time.” Luke let go of my hand and took a step forward. “The Almighty has plans for Evie and that child, Michael. I’ve seen it myself. Oppose us—try to hurt them—and you’ll be directly disregarding His will.”

“Yes, I’m sure the Almighty just *adores* having lengthy chat about His plans with the adversary and his whore.” Michael’s voice dripped with venom. “Your pride will be your downfall once again, Lucifer. And once that’s assured, this time, I’m not going to stop with just winning the battle.” He smiled. “I’m going to conquer Hell itself and put an end of to this chaos once and for all.”

EVIE

Back in our suite at the Bellagio, Luke was furious.
I didn't blame him.
I was pretty pissed off myself.

"This was his end game all along, the *bastard*." Luke paced the floor in front of the bed as I sat on it, feeling more helpless than I had in a long time. "That's why he's pretending to have misinterpreted the prophecy. He's always hated that I survived the Fall. When I conquered Hell, he hated it even more. And now, he's finally shown his hand. The real one."

"Why does he want so badly to destroy you?" Maybe I was naive, but as much as I knew the angels were our enemies, Michael's intentions seemed more incongruous with the values of Heaven all the time. "He says he wants order and balance. Surely Heaven and Hell balance each other out, don't they?"

"He's never liked that I disagreed with him about free will." Luke raked his fingers through his hair. "But you have a point. He's not stupid. Conquering Hell would throw all three realms out of balance entirely. Either he's gone mad with power—entirely possible—"

"Or he thinks he knows something that we don't." I shifted back onto the pillows and ran my hands over my belly until the thin cotton nightgown I'd changed into when we got back from the appointment lay smooth over it. "He seemed pretty certain that his interpretation of that prophecy was right."

"He's always certain that he's right." Luke scoffed. "And he thinks *I'm* the one with a pride problem."

“You said that Heaven and Hell were both given sets of those scrolls,” I pointed out. “No one has any idea who wrote them, though?”

“Not exactly,” Luke admitted. “There was no name to go along with them. I assumed it was the Almighty himself, alerting us of his will. His plan.”

“And Michael is probably working under the same assumption. But...” I bit my lip. “Luke, have you ever read the scrolls that Heaven received?”

“No,” said Luke. “Of course not. As you may recall, I spent my entire time in Heaven tortured by angels while nailed to a cross, love. There wasn’t exactly time to do any light reading.”

“I know.” I patted the bed next to me tentatively. Luke had every right to be frustrated right now, but all his pacing was making me nervous. “Come here, though.”

Luke stopped in his tracks, turned to me, and sighed.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be flippant with you.” He moved onto the bed beside me and draped an arm around my shoulders so I could cuddle against his chest. “None of this is your fault.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I... actually don’t think it is.”

Before I met Luke, I would have found some way to feel guilty about all of this. He’d once said that my greatest sin was believing that I was the thing that was wrong in the world. At the time, he was probably right. But being with him had changed me. I was more confident now than I’d ever been before.

Now, I was beginning to wonder if all the tragedy in our lives might have been someone else’s fault entirely.

Not Luke’s. Not even Michael’s. And certainly not the Almighty’s.

“Michael seems so sure that our baby will end the world,” I whispered against Luke’s chest.

“Just as certain as I am that it won’t,” Luke agreed. “It’s never made sense to me. The prophecy doesn’t say anything about an ending. Only something new.”

“Is it possible that Heaven received... a different set of scrolls?” I asked.

Luke was quiet for a moment. “Yes. I suppose that could be true. Without reading them, I’d have no way of knowing.”

“If you don’t know who sent them... maybe they weren’t from the Almighty at all.” That was a scary notion. It meant that either Michael or

Luke could be right about this baby. Or maybe, they were both completely wrong. “Maybe someone has been fucking with you both. Pulling the strings behind the scenes this whole time.”

“That’s not very reassuring, love.” Luke buried his face in my hair and sighed. “But yes. Now that you mention it, it would explain so much. Everything, maybe.”

“And it would mean that all this time, Heaven wasn’t really the enemy at all.” I shifted to look up at him. There was a cool sadness in the blues of his eyes. “Someone might have been playing us. All of us. Pitting you and Michael against each other for their own gain.”

“But who?” Luke’s brow furrowed. “Heaven and Hell have been warring on Earth over our love since shortly after it began. I don’t know who would benefit from it.”

“One of the gods from the other pantheons, maybe?”

“No.” Luke shook his head. “They have their own relationships with Earth. Our conflicts don’t overlap.”

“So, it’s someone that we know, then.” That was a harrowing thought. But if all the pantheons of gods that supposedly existed in our universe operated independently of each other, there was no other option. “Someone in Heaven or Hell that’s getting something out of conflict between the two.”

“I’m sure you’re right. But I don’t know who that would be.” Luke cupped my cheek in his hand and turned my lips up toward his. “And for the moment, it doesn’t matter. Michael has issued an ultimatum. If we don’t give him what he wants, he’s going to go through with it.”

“And if he conquers Hell... there won’t be anywhere for me to hide from him.” All this time, we’d been operating under the assumption that if I was in danger, I could always retreat to the Inferno or Pandemonium for safety. But if Hell fell to Heaven, that wouldn’t be an option anymore.

One way or another, Michael would hunt me down eventually.

He’d done it in every other life that Luke and I had shared.

He’d do it in this one, too. And in every other life I’d had, Michael had always managed to win.

“We’ll just have to win.” Luke’s lips found mine. His mouth moved soothingly against my own, but I could tell in that kiss he was holding himself back. He pulled away from it far too soon. “You’ll need to pack

your things, love. Quickly, I think. I want you back in Pandemonium before nightfall.”

“Why?” I frowned. “I don’t want to be away from you. Surely there’s something we can do—someone we can turn to—”

But I didn’t know who that would be. We had the same allies we’d always had. So did Michael. And if the gods from the other pantheons wouldn’t get wrapped up in our affairs...

Nothing had changed. Not really. In these beautiful months that Luke and I had spent together, I’d often hoped that things would be different this time, but they weren’t.

Heaven and Hell would do battle over my life once again.

And once again, Michael would find a way to end me. This time, maybe, for good.

“When Michael comes for our answer tomorrow, he’ll bring Heaven’s army with him,” said Luke. “When I tell him to shove his offer up his arse, there’s going to be war. I’m going to rally the Fallen and the forces of Hell. We’ve been preparing for an assault of this scale from Heaven ever since I took control of Below. Now, we’ll finally see how prepared we really are.”

“I should be there with you, then,” I pleaded with him. My fingers curled against his chest, clutching at his shirt. “Let me fight by your side. There’s too much at stake, Luke. We’re going to need everyone who can fight Heaven on deck if we want to win.”

“You’re pregnant, Evie.”

“I know that!” As if my swollen feet and my aching nipples and the flames in my big, round belly allowed me to forget. “But—”

“On the battlefield, you’ll only be a liability.” Luke shook his head and pulled me close to him. “I need you safe in Hell’s center, as far away from the battle as you can get.”

“But if you lose—”

“I won’t lose.”

“If you do, though.” I pulled away from Luke to stare into his eyes again. “Heaven will conquer Hell. They’ll claim it for themselves. And I’m not a human anymore, remember? I’m infernal. If Hell becomes Heavenly ground while I’m there inside it...”

“You’ll burn. I know.” Luke rested his forehead against mine. His gaze was intense with passion. “That’s why we’re not going to lose.”

“Okay,” I said softly. There was nothing else to say. “And my parents? My friends?”

“They’ll go to Pandemonium with you. We need them safe as well.”

“I hate all of this.” I buried my face in Luke’s chest. His arms wrapped around me tighter, but there was little comfort to be found in them.

All I’d wanted through all of this was a fucking chance. I wanted the people we loved to be safe. I wanted our family. I wanted *him*.

We’d never been allowed any of it. Ever since we’d met, from our first meeting right up through this latest one, we’d been threatened. We’d been torn apart again and again.

It didn’t feel fair. I knew that was just life sometimes, but did it have to be how our lives worked *every* time?

“I hate it too, love,” Luke’s lips murmured against the crown of my head. “You’re not alone.”

“I feel alone. If we lose this battle, you’re not just losing me this time. If Heaven conquers Hell and I burn in it... I’m not human anymore, Luke. There won’t be another reincarnation where we can try again. I’ll lose you too.”

It was all becoming too much to bear.

“You’re never alone, Evie. You still have me now. We still have a chance. And remember, you have your parents and your friends, too. They love you. *I* love you.” Luke pulled back to stare down at me again. “Can I show you something?”

“Another memory?” I wasn’t sure how that would help anything, but I was curious. “What’s it going to be this time? Me being murdered in Carthage? Having my throat slit by angels during the Civil War?”

“You’ve had too many bad memories brought back to you,” Luke soothed. He smoothed my hair down around my face. “Let me show you a good one. One of mine.”

“Which?” I asked. “It’s hard for any of them to be good when I know how they all end.”

Dying. Death and more death, over and over again without fail.

“Not this one,” Luke promised. “I want to show you the first time I saw you in this life.”

“In Limbo? That bar in the Inferno?” I touched the place where Luke had kissed my cheek. The little white star he’d left on my skin was still there, like a pale beauty mark.

“No,” he said with a gentle smile. “That wasn’t the first time. This was.”

He kissed me, hard and fast, and in an instant, I was whisked away.

LUKE

Somewhere In A Memory...

Atlantic City, New Jersey

As I moved through the Save A Lot, I tucked my hands into my pockets and kept my head low.

I was trying not to look suspicious, but that wasn't exactly easy right now. For one thing, I needed to keep a low profile today.

For another, it was hard not to look like absolute creep as I followed a mother and her child through aisles.

It was an inherently creepy act. I might have been the Devil himself, but even I knew that.

My intentions, on the other hand, were perfectly pure for once.

Belial had tipped me off. She was certain that the child was my Lilith. A little girl who would someday grow up into a woman that I would make my bride.

If she was right, we were in luck.

If I could find out for sure, I'd be able to offer her more protection this time around than I'd ever been able to give her before.

I'd moved here to Atlantic City from Vegas so I could keep an eye on her. Ever since, I'd been watching her from afar. If Belial had clocked that

this might be the next incarnation of Lilith, then the angels might have realized it as well.

So young, and already her life was in danger. I wouldn't speak with her, nor would I intervene in her life in any way. Not until she was older. But until then...

I sighed as I trailed behind them, following the thick waves of the little girl's long blonde hair.

I wanted to be sure, and I couldn't quite keep myself away until I knew.

This Evie was... adorable, in a word. She'd been babbling excitedly to her mother about all the books she'd been reading lately ever since they entered the store.

I had no way of knowing whether she'd keep that white-blond hair of hers as she grew up, or if it would darken into a pretty brown. It would be lovely, I knew, either way.

It always was.

She'd grow into a great beauty, if she really was the new Lilith. Someday, she'd become the love of my life.

But right now, she was just an innocent. A child. One that I needed to protect from danger if anyone else caught her in their sight as well.

"Can we buy one?" Evie asked, tugging on her mother's hand as they reached the checkout. With her other hand, she was pointing at a rack of books near the candy bars. "Just one. Pretty please? Pretty please, please, please?"

"Oh, princess," her mother sighed. "No, we can't afford any more books right now."

"Aww! But *please!*" Evie pointed at one book in particular, a paperback. I couldn't see yet which one it was. "I *really* want that one! It looks like it would be good!"

"Tell you what, hon. We'll go to the library tomorrow. Memorize the name, and I'll ask the librarian to find it for us."

Evie bent down to study the book's cover closely. "Charlotte's Web. By... E.B. White." She nodded decisively. "I won't forget."

"When it comes to books, you never do," her mother said with a tired laugh.

I wanted to step forward and offer to pay for it all—the groceries and the book alike. Every little thing I learned about Evie made me surer that

Belial had made the right call.

My Lilith had always loved stories. I'd told her the first ones, making them up as I went, in front of the first fire the Earth had ever known—one I'd set to light with a flaming sword stolen from the gates of Eden itself.

When I'd lost her, I'd invented the written word, then encouraged along the conception of the printing press. That way, no matter how long it took me to find her, she'd always have stories to keep her company until I could make her mine again.

But before I could reach for my wallet, I caught a dark flash out of the corner of my eye. There was another man drawing near. He was big and look hardened. The tattoos on his neck and beneath one eye looked like the kind that only a stint in prison could produce. One was a crooked set of wings, like a fly's, placed just below his ear. He had a pile of gold coins inked beneath his jawline and a twisted dragon symbol over his throat.

The leather jacket on his shoulders and the gold chain around his neck gave me an idea of how he'd ended up in prison to begin with.

A mobster—a made man. Or, more likely, one of their thugs.

His gaze was focused with intent on the little girl and her mother piling groceries onto the conveyor belt before the checkout.

Same as mine was.

I slipped into line behind Evie and her mother, placing my body between this man's and theirs. As I suspected he would, he got in line behind me.

He was close enough now that I could feel the sin coming off of him. Along with it was the palpable promise that he was planning to sin some more—and soon, too.

As I realized I had nothing for the clerk to ring up, I dipped down to grab the copy of Charlotte's Web that Evie had been eyeing.

Even if she wasn't my Lilith, I liked the idea of giving the little girl who reminded me so much of my love something nice to read tonight.

Once Evie's mother had paid for their groceries, I engaged the clerk with some clever chit-chat. She was an elderly woman who looked like she'd spent all day tired and bored. She was all too happy to talk—something interesting to help pass the time.

I handed off the cash for the book. I knew that time was what I was really buying right now. The man behind me shifted from one foot to the

other, anxious to get going as Evie and her mother disappeared out the supermarket's doors.

As the clerk handed me the book again, the man's patience wore too thin. He shoved past me and rushed out the doors.

I followed close behind. Whatever he wanted with little Evie and her mother, I knew it wouldn't amount to anything good.

I might have been the King of Sin, but I was hardly going to allow an innocent little girl to come to harm when I had every ability to prevent it. Whether she was my Lilith or not.

Outside, the man had Evie's mother cornered in the parking lot near a beat-up blue car. They were arguing—I couldn't hear about what.

But as the man grabbed for Evie's arm, I knew I wasn't going to let him get any closer to fulfilling his goal than he already had.

"That's not very polite of you, lad." I grabbed the man by his shoulder and spun him around, breaking his grip on Evie's arm. "Did you leave your manners at home today or did no one ever teach you any to begin with?"

"Fuck off," the man snarled at me.

Not a very clever quip, to be honest.

Luckily, I'd prepared a response in advance.

My fist.

I swung for him before he even realized what was happening. My knuckles cracked hard against his jaw. A look of surprise flashed through his eyes for a moment.

In the next moment, he hit the pavement. Knocked out cold.

"Go inside and ask the cashier to call the police," I told Evie's mother. "I don't know what kind of trouble you're in, but I imagine it will only get worse from here on out. I'll watch the girl and make sure he doesn't get back up."

Evie's mother blinked, then did as I asked. She wouldn't have left Evie alone with me if I hadn't suggested it, which inspired a great deal of faith in her for me.

But the fact of the matter was, I needed to see the girl's eyes to know if she was my Lilith or not—and when I wanted to, I could be a very persuasive man.

"Are you all right?" I asked Evie, crouching down so I could talk to her on her level. "Did he hurt you?"

"No," Evie said, frowning. "I'm okay, I think."

Then, she turned and gave the man a solid kick in his side. When her tiny trainer connected with his gut, its sole lit up with flashing pink lights.

"There," said Evie, nodding with satisfaction. "Now he's hurt instead."

"Yes," I said with a chuckle, impressed with how fierce she was. And at such a young age, too. "I imagine he is."

"Do you think he's dead?" Evie's eyes sought out mine.

My heart pounded in realization. Her eyes were rimmed with thick lashes. They were as gray as the sky before a storm.

In an instant, I knew.

She was back.

It was *her*.

"No," I admitted. "But I think he'll be very unhappy when he finally wakes up."

"He should be," Evie said with venom. "I didn't like him one bit."

"Good instincts," I told her.

It was a struggle not to laugh at how angry she looked. Indignance on the face of such a young child was always such a funny thing to see, but I knew she wouldn't appreciate being laughed at in her moment of righteous anger.

My Lilith never did.

"I want you to have this, Evie." I held out the book for her. "As a reward for how ferociously you fought today."

"Charlotte's Web!" Her eyes lit up as she took the book in hand. "Oh, I love it, I love it! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" She hugged it to her chest like it was long-lost friend. "It's *perfect*!"

Finally, I couldn't fight back the laugh anymore.

"You deserve it," I said, giving her a pat on the head. "I hope you love it just as much when it's done."

"I'll read it until it falls apart," Evie assured me. "Over and over again. I promise I will."

"You'd better." I glanced over my shoulder and saw her mother coming back out of the store. In the distance, I could hear the wail of police sirens coming our way. Time to take my leave. "Now. If anyone asks, I was never here. Our little secret, okay?"

"Our little secret." Evie gave me a serious nod. "I'll tell the cops *I* knocked him out. Bam!"

I grinned as I straightened. She really was something, wasn't she?
"You do just that."

As I walked away, I felt a sudden, almost holy rush of hope.

I knew I'd meet her again someday.

I knew someday, when she was older and a woman grown, I'd fall in love with her all over again.

But until then, I was glad that I could show her the small kindness of that gift. A simple book that had made her whole face light up just like the soles of her trainers.

Today, I'd kept her safe.

And I'd keep her safe tomorrow, too.

Every day, from this moment on, for the rest of her life.

EVIE

As Luke's memory faded away and the present came flooding back in, I pulled back from the kiss, a little in awe.

"That was you," I said softly, blinking.

"You remember?" Luke sounded surprised. "I was so sure you'd forgotten."

"No, I don't remember that day. But the book... it's the one you picked up in my room, back when we were visiting my parents." He'd been so charmed by it at the time, I remembered. Now, I knew why. "Why didn't you tell me then?"

"I was saving it for a special moment, I suppose." Luke sighed. "Shame I've had to spend it on a tragic one instead."

"I'm glad you showed me." So many of our most tender moments had been in preparation for tragic ones. They always had been. "I read that book from cover to cover so many times, the spine broke, you know."

"I saw." Luke chuckled. "Looked like you dropped it in the bath a time or two as well."

"More, probably."

"Good." He nodded with approval. "Then it was well-loved."

"Were you really watching over me for my entire childhood, though?" I frowned. "I thought you said you lost track of me until we met again in Limbo that night."

"I meant to keep an eye on you, yes. But it wasn't in the cards. That man, the one who attacked you and your mother, was some sort of mobster."

“Part of the mob that Dad managed to piss off, you think?” My parents still didn’t really talk about the chain of events that led us from moving away from New Jersey to Vermont. I’d been too young for them to explain it to me at the time. When I got old enough to ask about, they hadn’t really been generous with details. I’d always figured it was a part of their past they were happier to leave behind them. “We would have moved to Vermont with witness protection not long after while Dad waited for the trial against them to start.”

“It would make sense,” Luke agreed. “What doesn’t make sense is how you disappeared so completely from me in the process. I looked for you, you know. But...” He shrugged and squeezed me up tight in his arms. “You were gone.”

“You think it was the angels?”

“Maybe once.” Luke’s face was grim. “You were only a child. I thought your youth might have protected you from them if they’d found you as well. They don’t always try to kill you, you know.”

“Sometimes, they just try to marry me off to an Adam again instead.” My engagement to Adam felt more ridiculous than ever now. Part of me wondered if the reason I’d agreed to it in the first place was because Michael and Gabriel hadn’t managed to warp my brain into thinking it was a good idea. If my memories could be taken from me, anything was possible, I supposed. “Think they helped hide me away somewhere you couldn’t find?”

“I’m less sure now. You saw the tattoos on that thug’s neck, didn’t you? Demonic, some of those were. I was so focused on you, I hardly thought about it at the time, but seeing them again just now...”

“Could one of the Fallen have orchestrated that attack?” It was a possibility. Not exactly a reassuring one, though.

The Fallen were supposed to be our allies, not our enemies. But given how they’d responded to Luke’s return to Heaven...

Now more than ever, I was less certain of where they stood.

“Anything is possible. If it was, I doubt it was all of them. They can’t work together. They don’t know how.”

“Which means that it was just one.” I bit my lip, wondering if their reactions to his absence in Hell were worth mentioning. Probably. No secrets between soul mates, right? “Belial wanted to hold an orgy the

morning after you left for Heaven, you know. All Mammon wanted to talk about was business, and Beelzebub...”

“Did he try to propose to you?”

I blinked, staring up at him. “Yes, actually. How did you guess?”

“They all want you in their own ways. I’ve long suspected that if I wasn’t around, Zeb might try to put a ring of his own on your finger instead.” Luke’s brow twitched. His eyes glinted with a sudden darkness. “If we weren’t already drowning in enemies from Heaven, I’d toss him into the deepest pits of Hell and laugh as he struggled to claw his way out for even dreaming he could make you his.”

“I love when you talk dirty to me,” I sighed, trailing my fingers down his chest.

“I’ll remember that when all this is over, then.” Luke caught my fingers and drew them up to his lips instead. The kiss he pressed to them was firm and sweet, but when he lowered my hand, his mouth was set with grim determination. “But right now, we need to get you somewhere safe. It’s time to pack. Then, we have to go.”

“I know,” I said. “But I was thinking, if—”

“You can’t come with me tomorrow, love.” Luke sounded like he regretted it, but he also didn’t sound like he was willing to discuss the subject. “This battle we’ll be fighting—and it *will* come to blows when I tell Michael to politely go fuck himself—isn’t just for your safety, remember. It’s for this, too.”

He dipped down to kiss my belly. Beneath it, the flame wasn’t just a flame anymore. It was becoming a real thing now. It punched and kicked and sometimes even hiccupped inside me.

“I’ll keep you safe,” Luke swore. “And you’ll keep our baby safe. That’s the deal. All right?”

“I don’t like the idea of you dying up in the streets of Las Vegas while I’m tucked away in Pandemonium, sitting on my hands.” I pursed my lips. “It doesn’t seem like a very good deal.”

“I know, love.” Luke rose from the bed and offered me his hand. “But it’s the only game in town.”

THIS TIME, when we flew to Hell, we did it together. My wings still felt a little clumsy and uncertain, but when they faltered, Luke was there to

catch me beneath my arms and hold me aloft until I got my bearings again.

"Thank you," I said as my heart fluttered in my chest. "This really isn't any time to be falling, huh?"

"No," Luke agreed from above me. His wings flapped over us, broad and steady and pristinely white. I focused on matching their beat until my black wings moved like dark shadows beneath his. "But you know that I'd never let you fall."

Up ahead, the air shimmered over the rooftop of the version of the Inferno visible from the Vegas Strip. It was the same portal that Luke had flown me through in his helicopter so many times. An entryway that allowed us to pass from Earth into the upside-down version of the Inferno. The real one.

The one that was situated in Hell.

"You should leave me here." I unfolded Luke's fingers from beneath my arms and flew forward quickly. I stopped in front of him, hovering in front of the portal so he couldn't pass through. "You'll burn if you enter Hell again, and if you're really going to fight Heaven tomorrow, you're going to need all the strength you can get."

"This might be the last time we'll see each other for a little while, love." Luke flew to me, hovering as well, and took my hands in his. "I don't care if I burn for it."

I knew what he meant by *a little while*. It was a stand-in for the thing he couldn't say. The thing neither of us wanted to mention tonight.

If Luke lost the battle tomorrow, it wouldn't be just *a little while*.

I'd never see him again.

Tonight could very well be our last.

"Let's go somewhere else, then. Somewhere the angels won't expect to find us. One of those... I don't know, rent-by-the-hour places. A shitty motel. Anywhere but here." I slipped one of my hands from his grasp and stroked his cheek with my fingertips. "I don't *want* you to burn for me."

"I've been burning for you since the first time I laid eyes on you, love." Luke reclaimed my hand from his cheek and drew it to his lips. He pressed a firm kiss over my fingers. "You're safest in the Inferno tonight. One more time surely won't hurt."

I sighed. The shimmer in his pale blue eyes was honest and half-pleading and so full of love it made my chest ache.

I knew it would hurt him. No matter what he said.

But if this was really our last night together, I also knew we'd both be hurting so much more if we didn't make the most of it.

"Okay." There was no point in arguing with him. He was the most stubborn man I'd ever met in all my life. "Then let's go."

We flew through the portal together, entering Hell hand in hand.

Immediately, Luke's hand grew hotter in my own. I glanced over at him, worried, as I felt his skin begin to crumble away beneath my palm.

My breath caught in my throat in an instant. My eyes went wide with awe.

I'd expected to see the hollows of his cheeks smoldering, hot with embers. I'd expected to see his lips twisted in pain.

Instead, Luke glowed.

His skin cracked, flaking away like chips of paint. Beneath it, he was marble. A Roman statue, worthy of any museum. The light emanating from beneath the moving stone his body seemed to be made of now was gentle and beautifully white.

His lips were set into a charming, easy smile.

"You aren't burning." I wasn't about to complain about it, but it didn't make sense. Luke was an angel again now. Hell wasn't a place where he was safe.

It should have been killing him.

Instead, he looked more divine than ever.

He looked like a god.

"On the inside, I am," Luke assured me. We touched down on the roof of the Inferno together. When my feet touched the ground, he tugged on my hand, sending me stumbling against his chest and into his arms. "But on the outside... this is who I am now, love. This is my angelic form."

"It's... incredible." I moved a hand to his neck to brush my fingers against his skin. It was both pleasantly warm and strangely cool. Like running my hands under water so hot, it felt cold. His body was soft like flesh and hard like stone all at once. When my gaze met his, I felt a shiver. "I feel like I don't ever want to look away."

"Then you know how I feel when I look at you," said Luke. He tilted his head, leaning into my touch. "It would drive a human mad to look at me when I'm like this, you know."

"Then I'm glad I'm not a human anymore." I searched his eyes and lips for pain again but didn't find any. Only Luke's comfortable smile and

his celestial glow. Just like a star. “How can you be so calm, though? Doesn’t it hurt to be here like this?”

“It does,” Luke admitted with a small nod. “Deep down. But not as badly as you’d think. I can bear it.” He took my face into his hands and drew my lips toward his, hesitating the moment before the kiss. “Hard to hurt too much when your lips are only a breath away.”

He kissed me gently at first, like he was afraid that when his lips met mine, I would burn too.

But his kiss only seared in the best of ways. It stirred heat up inside me. A slow, sinking kind of warmth that started on the tip of my tongue as I smoothed it across his lower lip, then unfurled deep into my muscles as he moved his tongue against mine as well.

“I’m going to take you to bed now, darling girl.” Luke’s breath shuddered as the kiss broke. He ran his fingers through my hair like he was trying to put its texture to memory. “And when I get you there, I’m going to remind you exactly what kind of man you married. Exactly how loved you really are.”

And he did.

He really did.

We took the elevator up to the ninth floor. By the time we stumbled out of it together, our bodies were so desperately intertwined, we were lucky that we’d done this so many times before. We stumbled slow and blind through the suite like two dancers in a clumsy waltz that only worked because we knew each other’s bodies so well. Our lips didn’t leave each other’s. We refused to pause our kisses. Even as we tore each other’s clothes off, we did it without looking.

It was like every kiss could be our last now—so we made every kiss count.

“So beautiful,” Luke breathed when he finally got me onto the bed. He touched his fingertips to my temples, then ran them all the way down the length of my body. His fingers rose over the firm mounds of my breasts, making my aching nipples swell and stiffen. He dragged his fingers down my ribs, caressed my round, pregnant belly, then slipped them between my thighs, spreading them apart to reveal my cunt. “Even after all this time, I can still hardly believe that you’re really mine.”

“Of course I’m yours.” I raised my hips up toward his mouth as he settled between my legs. The heat he’d stirred in me on the rooftop was

pulsing through me even hotter now that he had me in his bed. My pussy was flushed and throbbing with need. I could smell it from here: earthy and sweet and soaking wet. “I couldn’t ever belong to anyone else.”

“And you won’t.” Luke’s eyes flashed up at me over the swell of my belly. His gaze was more intense than I’d ever seen it. “No matter what, love. You belong to me, and me alone.”

“Yes,” I breathed. I knew it was true.

But Luke had never been one to make a point without finding a way to really drive it home.

As he lowered his mouth to my cunt, I knew this one would be no different.

He kissed the valleys of my inner thighs like they were something holy. When his lips trailed down to my pussy, he kissed it in the same way he kissed my mouth. His tongue slipped into my folds, tasting and teasing.

He had me gasping for him by the time he finally reached my clit.

“Perfect cunt. So fucking beautiful.”

His breath washed over my swollen, sensitive bud with humidity as he spoke. Luke’s hands curled around my hips, pulling me closer with a rough tug.

He sucked my clit into his mouth, and I moaned, needy and high-pitched. He took it gently between his teeth and I gasped as he moved his tongue against it in slow, steady licks.

“Mm.” He moaned back at me like I was something delicious. A treat. “Fuck, your cunt is sweet.”

His fingers pressed into my lower back, massaging deep into my muscles, while he rolled my clit in tiny circles with his tongue.

The combination of the sensations created waves of pleasure that rippled through my body. One from my clit, the other from my back. Both ended up in the same place: my core. My womb. It was throbbing softly with every touch Luke gave me. Around it, something was stirring. Not the baby, which felt like it was fast asleep, but something just as significant and profound.

It was a gentle ecstasy, the slow-building kind. When I’d imagined this moment—despite my best efforts to argue with Luke about it, I knew that inevitably, I’d end up right here with him in this bed, just like this—I’d imagined it quick and frantic. A sloppy, intense act of desperation sped up to ensure that Luke only felt minimal pain.

But Luke refused to turn it into that thing. I knew he must have been hurting, but he didn't show it.

He was slow with me. He took his time.

Every movement of his lips and tongue and teeth against my clit felt intensely profound.

Every throb of pleasure he gave me felt like it meant something. Something bigger than just me and him together in bed.

It felt like a love greater than the entire universe itself.

"Come here," I beckoned him as the heat he was creating between my legs started to swell into something more urgent and intense. My breath rose and fell heavy in my chest. I raked my fingers through his hair, then tugged gently at his head to pull him up toward me. "I want you, Luke. All of you. Please."

"You're having me, love." Luke kissed my belly, then slipped back down between my legs to continue licking my cunt. "Want to enjoy you."

"You're hurting, Luke." Every time I looked back down at his blue eyes and his pale marble skin, he was glowing brighter and brighter. His tongue against my clit was inhumanly hot. As much as I loved the way he was taking his time with me, I knew that for every moment of pleasure he was giving me right now, he was paying with incredible pain as well. "I need you *now*. Before we run out of time."

"I can take it." But as Luke rested his cheek against my inner thigh for a moment, I could feel exactly how hot his skin was burning. I was certain that if I'd still been human, it would have hurt me just to be touched by him right now.

But I wasn't human anymore, and the heat from Luke's angelic skin only called out to the flush of desire I felt beneath my own.

"Luke, I need you," I pleaded with him. I did. The need panged within me, ringing through every nerve of my body and coiling in my core with a tension that begged for release. "Fuck me. Now. Please."

"Oh, Evie," Luke breathed against my thigh. His eyes met mine, hooded and full of flames. "You know I love it when you beg."

Finally, Luke placed a hand over my cunt and shifted over me. The swell of my belly kept him from folding his body over mine. It was almost a shame—I would have liked to be held tight and close. I would have liked to have my body pinned helplessly beneath his.

But as Luke took his cock in his fist, from this position I had the benefit of seeing all of him. His chest, broad and chiseled. His cock, long and hard between his thick, powerful thighs. As he stroked it over my cunt, his lips pulled back slightly, revealing a flash of incisors that looked surprisingly sharp. Behind him, his wings were folded against his back, tall and pale with glistening feathers.

His eyes were pure, pale blue flame.

His entire body was covered in a white-hot glow.

“Come here, then.” Luke took my hips in his hands again and dragged me toward him on the bed. “Need you close, you perfect, hot-cunted thing.”

My cunt did feel hot. It burned nearly as hot as Luke did. My clit was still throbbing from the ministrations of his tongue. My slit was dripping with honey and clenching around nothing—at least, until Luke finally dropped his hips down and placed his cock flush with the slickness of my folds.

I waited for a thrust—one of those hard, rough ones that would leave me gasping and twisting the sheets beneath me in my fists—but instead, Luke only pressed his tip firmly against my entrance.

My pussy throbbed harder. It wanted to be fucked. It wanted to be *full*.

And as it clenched in desperation, Luke didn’t end up having to thrust inside me.

Eagerly, my pussy sucked the tip of him in.

“Fuck,” Luke breathed, pressing his hips down and leaning into the sensation. His cock slid into me with perfection, stretching me just enough to fit its thickness. “You’re so fucking tight, love...”

“More,” I begged. “I need all of you. Give it to me. Please.”

Luke curled a hand around the back of my head, cradling it and using it for leverage at the same time. He moved over me with focused care. His hips shifted against my thighs. They pumped into me slowly at first, but there was a palpable momentum between our bodies now.

As Luke fed my cunt inch after inch of his hard, thick shaft, drawing back only so he could delve in deeper with his next thrust, we were coming together quicker with every passing moment. Having Luke inside me felt incredibly urgent. Like a mutual hunger that would kill us both if it wasn’t satisfied.

Soon, neither of us would be able to maintain control of this at all anymore.

I saw the exact moment that Luke realized it. Finally, as he buried the final inches of his cock into my cunt, the understanding that he was about to lose control flashed across his eyes.

In an instant, we were rolling together. His wings folded away as he placed himself on his back and lifted me up on top of him.

“Ride me,” he commanded in a growl. “My Evie. My Lilith. Claim my cock like the goddess you are. Just like you did the first time we made love.”

My hips were already moving, answering his order before he was even finished giving it. Deep, sharp, primal pleasure surged through me every time my hips met his. Beneath me, his hips were working too.

We moved together in exquisite harmony. Two bodies, desperate for each other and desperately in love, coming together as one.

And *god*—when we came *together*, in a rapidly building orgasm that unleashed between us at the same time, it was a rapture. I cried out as the orgasm hit, clinging to Luke’s shoulders for dear life. Luke grunted and growled back, arching beneath me and bucking his hips so hard that they lifted both of us up off the mattress. The heat and light he was giving off was blinding.

So blinding that I could see it, wild explosions of pleasure and agony alike, even when I closed my eyes.

I knew the moment when the orgasm hit. What I didn’t know was when it ended. It felt like it lasted an eternity. Every time I thought it would fade, it only rose up again in a whole new intensity, completely unlike anything else I’d ever felt.

I lost myself in it.

I lost myself in him.

“Love?”

I opened my eyes slowly to the sound of Luke’s voice. I didn’t know how much time had passed, or whether I’d even been conscious for all of it.

I only knew that I was warm and tired and wrapped in his arms.

We were lying together on our sides now, though I didn’t entirely recall how we’d gotten there. My body was slick with sweat. Luke’s cock was still inside me.

“Love.” Luke’s fingers stroked my cheek with concern. “Are you all right?”

“I’m all right.” I nodded and cuddled deeper into his embrace. There wasn’t a single bead of sweat on him. When his skin came into contact with the beads of it on my own body, in an instant it turned to steam. “Are you?”

“I’ll manage.” The pain was more clearly written on his face now. Still, impossibly, he was remaining stoic through all of this. I had no idea how. “It hurts, but I don’t want to leave you. Not quite yet.”

“You have to,” I whispered. I knew it was true. But I clung to him just the same. “I don’t want you to hurt.”

“You’re worth it.” He pressed his lips to my forehead and squeezed me tight to his chest. “And there are a few more things I still have left to do before I go.”

Luke unwound his body from mine slowly. His shoulders were tense as he moved across the room to the place where we’d abandoned his pants in the tender striptease we’d done for each other on the way to bed.

When he returned, he had his dagger in his hand.

“What’s that for?” I asked. My eyelids were heavy, and my mind felt hazy, but my body felt more awake than it had ever been.

“I want to cut your hair, love,” Luke said as he sat back down on the bed. “You’ve never liked it so long, and I like it any way you do. It’s silly, after all of this loss we’ve been through, to keep anything you don’t love.”

I bit my lip. My hair had been impossibly long and heavy for almost my entire life. First, I’d kept it that way because I’d liked it. Then, I’d kept it long for Adam.

But Luke was right. I didn’t love it anymore.

I shifted myself up into a sitting position and gathered my hair up in my fists. “Okay. Cut it, then.”

I bowed my head, and in a single, quick motion of his dagger, Luke severed my waves on the edge of his blade.

When it was done, we both breathed a sigh of relief. It felt like a huge weight had been removed from my shoulders. A glance at the thick length of hair that Luke now held in his fist told me that one really had been.

It wasn’t anything compared to the weight of what I knew would happen when he met with Michael tomorrow morning.

But it was something. In an ocean of guilt and heartbreak, it was a tiny reprieve.

“Will you keep a lock of it with you tomorrow?” I asked.

Luke nodded and placed the rope of my hair aside. “I will. Of course I will.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” I warned him.

He smiled. “Good. Then let me hold you as well.”

He moved behind me on the bed, pressing his chest to my back and pulling my body as close to his as two bodies could be. His hands roamed over my belly for a moment, then his fingers twined into the spaces between mine.

“If I fail tomorrow,” he whispered into my ear. “If Hell should fall—”

“We can’t let that happen, Luke.” It was a possibility too horrible to even imagine right now.

If it became reality, I didn’t know that it would be one I could face.

“I know. But if does.” He raised my hand up in front of my face. The ring he’d placed on my finger—the one that marked me as his wife—glimmered in his glow. “I want you to touch this ring, and I want you to think of home. You need to be in Pandemonium to stay as safe as possible during the battle. But if Hell becomes Heavenly ground, you’ll burn. I can’t let that happen.”

“You’re my home.” It sounded stupid, but I couldn’t help it. It was true.

“Think of Vermont. Go to your parents,” Luke said sternly. “Promise me, Evie. If Hell falls, the second most dangerous place for you to be is at my side.”

“Okay.” My voice was tired and small. It broke my heart to agree with him, but I knew Luke. I trusted him more than I trusted anyone I’d ever known.

If this was what he needed me to do, then it wasn’t even a matter of honoring my vow to obey him anymore.

In the roots of my teeth and the marrow of my bones, I knew that everything he told me now as he continued to endure the pain of existing here in Hell was urgent and essential.

Everything Luke did and said was meant to keep me and our baby safe.

“Thank you, Evie.” Luke’s lips seared against my neck as he brushed them over my skin. “Now. Promise me one last thing?”

“Of course,” I said. “Anything.”

“If I die tomorrow—and I might.” The worst-case scenario. The very thing we’d thought impossible, suddenly so real with possibility that it made me want to cry. “If Hell falls. I need you to be strong through it.”

He folded my hand over my belly, then placed his on top of it.

“I don’t know how I’d be able to be,” I admitted. “But I’ll try.”

“You’ll have to do more than try, love. You’ll have to succeed.” Beneath our hands, the baby gave a little kick of encouragement. “This child is our legacy. Something new and wonderful and perfect. Be strong for me. Be strong for our baby. Raise him to be good and loving and kind, and if he asks about me...” Luke gave a ragged laugh. “Tell him I was good and kind too. Even if it’s a lie.”

“How could it be a lie, Luke?” I brought his hand up to my lips so I could kiss it. His skin was beginning to fracture now. The light inside him was leaking out in bursts now. “You are good. You are kind. You’ve loved me for as long as I’ve known life. You’re the best man I’ve ever met. Your love is the greatest thing I’ve ever known.”

“Good,” Luke said. “Then tell him that.”

“You’re still so sure that the baby is going to be a boy?” I asked. I wished I could see Luke’s face, but my body was too exhausted to roll over.

Maybe it was for the best. I could hear the pain in his voice now. It was becoming too much for even Luke to bear.

“I am,” Luke said. He sounded like the belief was something beyond even the darkest shadows of doubt.

“I promise, then,” I told him. “I’ll be strong like you’ve been strong for me. I’ll raise our son, just like you’ve said—and I’ll tell him every story about you that I know.”

Every story I knew of Luke was a good one. For our entire love, Luke *had* been good. He *had* been loving and kind.

Even though he was the Devil, not a single thing I told our child about him would ever have to be a lie.

“Do you love me, Evie?” I knew he had to leave soon, but the fact that he’d waited to ask me this time was the greatest blessing I could have imagined.

“I do, Luke.” I nodded and closed my eyes, trying to memorize the way his body felt against mine. “I love you deeper than the oceans and more

than there are stars in the sky.”

Luke pressed his cheek to mine from behind and wrapped me up as tight as our bodies would allow.

“Yes,” he whispered back to me. “Good. That’s exactly how I love you. Exactly like this. Exactly like that.”

EVIE

When I woke up the next morning, he was gone. Just like I'd known he would be.

He'd waited until I fell asleep to do it, which was kind of him.

He'd taken the length of my hair with him. I touched my fingers to my mouth, feeling a kiss I'd been asleep for still burning there on my lips.

A kiss goodbye.

I wanted to cry, but I knew I wasn't able to. We'd been pulled apart too many times. We'd fought our way back together over and over again, only to be separated once more.

Too many times, I'd accepted the reality that I was never going to see my husband again.

There weren't any tears left to cry now. Only an empty feeling in their place. I was a glass that had been tipped over so many times, it had finally been shattered.

Maybe when Luke met with Michael today, he'd win. He'd come back to me and we could pick up the pieces once more. The same way we always did.

Or maybe, he'd lose.

Maybe this really would be the end.

I rolled over and hugged the pillow that had once been his. It was where he'd laid his head on that first morning when I'd woken up here in the Inferno, back when I'd had no idea who the hell Luke Dawnstar, CEO of Adversary Industries, even was.

I hadn't even known who *I* was back then.

Thanks to Luke, I did now. Even better, I'd become something so much more than the person I'd been before he'd entered my life. I'd been so stupid when we first met. Just a silly girl willingly giving up her life to be with a man who'd never loved her. A naive idiot clutching at her pearls over the idea of marrying a different man—a better one—after only knowing him for a single night.

If I could have gone back to that moment, I would have agreed to breakfast and let Luke give me a good, hard fucking while we waited for it to arrive.

Hindsight was twenty-twenty, I guessed.

I'd never get that morning back. All I could do was hope for more mornings in the days to come.

Maybe if Luke won this battle today, we could finally stop feeling like we were living on borrowed time.

I took a shower. The warm water over my aching breasts and heavy belly felt good, but I was only under it for a few minutes before the heat and the steam started to get to my head.

As I climbed back out and wrapped myself in a towel, I felt dizzy and a little sick. Whether it was from stress, or pregnancy, or both, it was hard to say.

With my husband about to battle with angels on my behalf and a baby on the way, I probably had every right to feel sick.

By the time I'd gotten clothes on—a soft blue dress and some comfortable shoes—I heard the knock on the door of the bedroom. Behind it was Charon, offering me his arm and a sad smile.

"Time to go?" I guessed. Deeper in Hell, the safety of Pandemonium awaited me.

But it would only be safe for as long as Hell's armies held.

"Time to go," Charon agreed. "Your friends are already there, waiting for you."

It was a small relief. Bea, Joan and Ava had always been there for me before. Through every difficulty and heartache any of us had ever faced, we'd always been there for each other.

Today would be no different. We'd get through this battle together. For their safety as well as mine.

With a nod of resignation, I took his arm and let him help me toward the door.

“EVES!” Ava rushed to me as soon as I stepped foot into my bedroom in Pandemonium. Joan and Bea weren’t far behind. “Oh my god, you cut your hair!”

“Luke cut it for me,” I explained as they all wrapped me up in a hug. “He’s always known I never liked it long. It felt like it was finally time to chop it off.”

For a long moment, none of us said anything. They hugged me in a big dogpile, and I hugged them right back.

“Arrf!” The Beast yipped, racing out from beneath the bed and nipping at each of our heels until finally, Joan bent down to pick him up.

“Little hoodlum.” She scowled fondly at him as she folded his furry body into the hug as well. “He doesn’t like being left out.”

“I’m sorry, buddy.” I bent down to give him a kiss on the forehead. “You must’ve felt like we abandoned you.”

For the seven beautiful months Luke and I had spent together in the Bellagio, I supposed we kind of had.

“Couldn’t exactly keep a puppy that’s still learning when and where he can tinkle in your luxury suite,” Bea pointed out. “Besides, we’ve been keeping him company while Charon taught him to stop eating shoes. This little guy’s company made my wedding planning far more pleasant.”

“And finishing my thesis,” Ava added.

“And mine,” said Joan.

“Congrats, by the way,” I said with a smile, and meant it. My own degree had been left on the backburner after Raph’s... death? Disappearance? I still wasn’t entirely sure. Given our last meeting, I didn’t know that I cared, either. But the fact that the girls had been able to finish up their own degrees was a relief.

It meant that I hadn’t entirely fucked their lives up by being in them. At least, not as much as I could have.

“Oh, hon. I’m sorry you weren’t able to... well, you know.” Bea wrapped me up especially tight. “It’s not fair.”

“It’s life,” I said with a shrug. “I don’t know that I would have been able to finish my thesis through the pregnancy fatigue anyway, you know.”

For the last seven months, pretty much all I've wanted to do is eat, sleep and—"

"Have your brains fucked out?" Joan supplied.

"Yeah," I said with a laugh. "Something like that. Pregnancy horniness has been a thing, too."

Not today, though.

Today, my sexuality was completely silent. I only felt off-kilter. Full of anxiety and raw nerves.

"Eves," Ava whispered, gesturing downward with her gaze. "I think the baby might be... *kicking*."

"It does that a lot," I admitted. We were still all so tangled up in our hug, I supposed Ava must have been close to just the right part of my belly at the right time. "Ten kicks or more an hour ever since a couple months ago. Sometimes, I can feel her get hiccups, too."

"Her?" Bea arched an eyebrow, smiling with delight. "I thought you two were trying not to find out until the birth."

"Luke still seems so certain that it's going to be a boy." His prophecy had told him so, after all. "But sometimes... yeah. I can imagine that she's a girl, at least. That's probably crazy, though. Can anyone really tell?"

"My mom knew I was going to be a girl," said Ava. "Seventh daughter of a seventh daughter. She always joked it meant I'd have the Sight, but..."

Ava sighed. We all joined her in it.

Everything that we knew would be happening up on Earth right now had gone unspoken between us so far. As we separated from the hug and the girls headed to the bed with The Beast, I knew that they must have been hurting too.

They cared about Don, Lock and Mal too. They might not have been married to Luke's demon friends, but I knew there were feelings there. Even for Joan—I still hadn't heard from Lock about whether or not he'd ever managed to actually ask her on a proper date yet—there was still a close friendship on the line today. Maybe more.

"I'm sorry," I told them all. "I know that you all must be hurting."

"Eves..." Ava said gently.

"You have more at stake today than anyone," Bea pointed out. "You don't need to apologize. None of this is your fault. You do realize that, right?"

“I do. But I still feel guilty.” It was a hard feeling to shake. “I’ve dragged you all into this with me. I didn’t mean to, but I know you’ve had to deal with a lot of weird shit ever since Luke and I found each other again.”

“Yeah, and it’s been a blast.” Joan gave me a reassuring grin. “I’ve gotten to fight minotaurs because of you! I’ve fucked fallen angels!”

“Have you really?” Bea asked, then laughed. “Never mind. Of course you have. I don’t know why I’m surprised.”

“I never would have gotten to know Mal without you,” Ava added. “I would have just kept... I don’t know, blushing every time he walked into a room.”

“And I met Don.” Bea sounded the saddest of the three. It made sense. Even if Don made it through the battle today healthy and well, Bea was engaged to marry someone else. It was something that I didn’t think I’d ever understand, but Bea was from a totally different world than the rest of us. Her family had enough money, the rules she had to live by were as strange to me as any in Heaven or Hell. “I’m glad for it, Eves. Without you, our lives would have certainly been boring over the last year.”

“Aarrf!” The Beast yipped, doing hot laps around the mattress.

“Do you want to come sit with us while we wait to see what happens?” Ava patted a space on the bed next to her, but I shook my head.

“I think I might need to walk around for a little bit.” I placed my hands over my stomach, feeling even more unsettled than ever now. “The baby’s doing a tap dance on my insides right now. I’m going to take a stroll out in the gardens and see if it won’t calm down.”

“Come back soon then,” Joan said. “You shouldn’t have to spend today alone. We’re here for you.”

“If we weren’t here for you on the day that Heaven and Hell do battle for the fate of you and your little family, what kind of friends would we be?” Bea gave me a smile in parting.

I gave her one back, then headed out for the balcony and down to the gardens below.

As I neared a bush of eglantine roses—Luke’s favorites, and mine now too—the kicking in my belly got even more intense. At least it wasn’t being focused on my bladder this time—that hadn’t been fun. But it felt like the baby was trying to tell me something. Banging it out in Morse code against my womb.

“Shh. It’s all right,” I said, rubbing my hands over its furious little feet. “Everything’s going to be okay. Your daddy is going to make sure of it.”

I hoped that it wasn’t a lie. The baby seemed to believe it, though. Slowly, the kicks subsided. My lower back ached for a moment, then I felt the baby turn. It dropped suddenly, shifting into a lower position where it seemed to be more comfortable.

That was a relief, at least. Maybe if the baby was calm, I could be too. Maybe it knew something that I didn’t yet.

I wandered a little further into the thickets of Pandemonium’s gardens. They were wild and winding, but I assumed they’d been planned that way.

They were beautiful. All the flowers and leaves actually reminded me of Eden in that memory that Luke had shown me.

If everything turned out okay and we could find a way to make Luke Infernal again, maybe this could be our own little Eden. We could play with the baby in it together. *Hand in hand with wandering steps and slow*, just like Milton had written.

It was a nice thought, at least.

I’d cling to it, just like I was clinging to hope.

“Your Highness?”

The voice that called out to me was familiar, but one that I hadn’t heard in a long while.

I peered around a thicket of thorns and found the face that matched the voice staring back at me in wonder.

It was a face I hadn’t seen for a while, either.

“Phlegyas?” I blinked, stunned, as he grabbed my hand and clutched it in his. “Where have you been?”

“I’ve been away, Your Highness.” He dropped to his knees and held my hand tight. “And ever since I found my way back here... I haven’t had the courage to show my face.”

“Why not?” It wasn’t as if Phlegyas had ever been cruel to me. If anything, he’d been fatherly and kind. An ear to listen to my worries and a voice that gave me encouragement when I needed it most. “Where did you go?”

“I...” Phlegyas bowed his head low and cleared his throat. “No questions, please. I need to confess something to you. But to answer what

you've asked me, I need to tell it all in the order that it makes the most sense."

And then he did. All of it. He told me again of his daughter, who was up in Heaven without him. He told me about how he'd appealed to the angels for mercy. How they'd given him a few tasks—tasks that he'd thought would be simple to complete in exchange for entrance through the pearly gates.

"But then I met you, Evie. And you were so kind to me—so sweet and so good-hearted—that it tainted every action I took from that moment on," Phlegyas said mournfully. "I took your memories on the morning after your wedding while you slept. I reported to the angels your comings and goings from Hell. I told them how you'd tried to leave, and how Luke had ordered you not to go. All of this—" He gestured above us, where I knew a battle must have already broken out. "It's all my fault."

I blinked at him, trying to process. My brain felt strangely fuzzy all of a sudden, so it took me a moment or two longer than I would have liked.

"That's..." I shook my head and placed my hands around my belly. It felt heavy in a different way now. It had, I supposed, ever since the baby had shifted. Strange—but everything about pregnancy was. "I... I don't know what to say, Phlegyas. Did you at least get to meet your daughter again?"

And if so, why was he here?

Surely, he hadn't come all the way back to Hell to make an apology.

"I was tricked," Phlegyas said, shaking his head. "Just when I thought Michael had finally taken me to Heaven... he dropped me instead. I plummeted back down to Earth. I wandered the Abyss for a while. And then, when I heard that you were coming to Hell again while Luke battled the angels... I'm so sorry, your Highness. I shouldn't have done what I did. I regret it every day."

"It's... okay," I said after a long moment.

"Is it?" Phlegyas looked up at me, eyes full of tentative relief.

It wasn't, but he seemed sincere. There was no turning back time now, and my body felt like it was churning. I felt strange. I felt sick. The dizziness I'd experienced this morning in the shower had returned, and my brain was full of static. Too much to get angry though.

I tried to imagine being separated from my own baby. It wasn't even born yet, but if the angels got their way—if they took the life that Luke

and I had created together to Heaven like they planned, separating us forever—I might do terrible things to try to fix it, too.

I didn't appreciate his betrayal, but it was in the past now.

I understood. And that meant I could forgive, too.

"I can't believe the angels had you do all that for nothing. I'm sorry you didn't get what you wanted either."

"It was my own fault," Phlegyas whispered. "I've always liked you, Your Majesty. Ever since I met you. And when you spoke to me in the elevator that day about becoming a mother... do you remember?"

"Yes," I said. "A little. You told me about your daughter, too."

"I felt for you in that moment more than ever. I knew that Lucifer would be parted from you again because of my actions. I wanted to give you something to remember your husband by. I wanted you to know the joy of having a child, too." He nodded at my arm. "Your birth control implant. I touched your arm to remove it."

"You... you took my birth control out of... my arm?" I furrowed my brow. Things weren't just fuzzy in my brain anymore. They were fuzzy in my vision, too. Phlegyas' face blurred strangely. Buzzing filled my ears, almost in the way it did when Beelzebub entered a room—but different, too.

Definitely different.

Something was happening.

It wasn't until I felt a gentle snap inside me that I realized what that something was.

Warmth and wetness flowed down my thighs from between my legs. I felt so faint as it trickled down to my ankles, I dropped to my knees there with Phlegyas in the dirt.

"Your Majesty?" He lifted a hand to my face, brushing my hair away from my cheek. His palm felt hot and cold all at once. As he moved his fingers across my cheek, I realized I was covered in sweat. "Are you all right?"

"I don't know," I whispered. My eyes were wide, but I couldn't make my vision go clear. There was a pressure low in my belly. In my head, the buzzing only got louder. "I think..."

I think I'm going into labor, I wanted to say, but my lips wouldn't form the words.

It was two months early. Far too soon for this.

But my water had just broken. When I closed my eyes, I could see a golden glow all around my belly, shimmering and bright.

Instinctively, I brushed my fingertips against the ring Luke had given me. I needed something to ground myself on in that moment, and the black diamond of my ring was pleasantly rough and cool.

If anything happens, touch the ring and think of home.

Instead, a thought of Luke flashed across my mind before I could stop it.

I needed him. I tried to fight the thought back, but I couldn't.

This baby was coming. *Now*. And thinking of Luke—it was the only thing that I wanted. It was the only thing that felt right.

In an instant, a strong wind picked up around me. I drew in a breath—
And I found myself somewhere else.

Not somewhere in a memory. Not this time.

This time, I found him.

LUKE

It played out in the exact way I suspected it would.

“Have you made your decision?” Michael stood before the Inferno with his army assembled behind him. All the cherubim with their lion’s talons and eagle’s wings. All the seraphim, beautiful and deadly and armed with swords.

All the angels of Heaven waited for his word. Either to stand down, or to attack.

“I have,” I told Michael, all of Hell’s armies at my back as well. The Fallen had assembled. For once, this wasn’t a fight they could run from. With them were our demons, our minotaurs, and giants and hellhounds. Only Legion and The Beast were absent from our ranks. The former was still protecting Evie’s parents in Vermont. The latter was in Pandemonium, protecting Evie herself.

“Say it then,” Michael commanded.

Even before the word left my lips, I could tell he knew I was going to say no.

The battle began as soon as my answer rang out. Our forces clashed together like waves of competing oceans.

Neither army had any intention of giving in. Heaven had too much to gain today to consider anything but victory.

Hell had too much to lose—and I had the most on the line of all.

Angels flooded in around Michael as soon as I drew my dagger and Evie’s flaming sword. They prevented me from battling him one-on-one and suffered dearly for it.

It would have been all too easy to dismiss Michael's refusal to engage me as one of cowardice. I wanted to roar it at him: *coward! Come and fight me yourself!*

But I knew that like always, Michael's choices were carefully calculated.

He and I would burn ourselves out doing battle against each other. We were evenly matched. Neither of us would ever win.

He didn't want this to end with a draw between us, though. I could tell.

He wanted me weakened enough by his minions that by the time I finally fought my way to him, he wouldn't just win.

He'd kill me as well.

I fought anyway. What choice did I have? Every opponent I sank my sword into was one less that the others would have to deal with.

Every moment I fought my way forward, my fury at Michael grew.

We both thought that we were fighting for the good of our shared universe. But I had one thing in this battle that Michael didn't.

Or, technically, I supposed, I had two.

I had Evie, the love of my life. My first. My only. I'd lost her so many times, the rage in my chest at the thought of losing her again gave me a strength and a bloodthirst that wouldn't be denied.

If I lost this battle, I'd lose her forever this time.

It wasn't just Evie I was fighting for now, though.

It was the life of our unborn child on the line too.

I cut down the last opponent standing between Michael and me with fire in my eyes to match the flames of the sword in my hand.

"Ah, adversary. I knew you'd find me." Michael readied his spear as I approached. There was smirk on his lips I was going to relish making him regret. "Couldn't help yourself, could you?"

"You know I've never been good at denying myself the things I want. As for helping myself, though..." I smirked back at him with angelic blood glistening across my face. "I've always been of the opinion that helping myself is one of my many strengths."

I wanted to make him hurt. For all times he'd taken Evie away from me, I wanted to do more than just hurt him, even.

Michael wanted to kill me today.

I wanted to kill him as well.

“You’re weakened, you know.” We moved in a slow circle, locked in each other’s orbits, while the battle raged all around. “You won’t be able to win.”

“Can’t afford to lose,” I countered. My fists tightened around my weapons. Dagger in one hand, sword in the other. I’d wrapped the entire length of Evie’s hair around the hilt of the sword. To my amazement, it had turned to gold as soon as I was done. Now, it served as my grip. Beneath my palm, it reminded me of what I fought for.

It reminded me of the love of my wife.

I’d fight with sword and dagger both in this duel; the sword for beating Michael’s spear aside, the dagger for sinking between his ribs once an opening was made.

He lunged for me first. Our weapons clashed. When I jabbed at him with my dagger, he spun away. I spun as well, bringing my sword around to meet with his spear again—

And just like that, it was on.

We fought like dancers. After millennia of fighting against each other, he knew all of my moves, and I knew all of his.

My muscles burned with fatigue, but I ignored them. This body had served me well so far. I knew it wouldn’t fail me now.

Every time he cut me—across the chest once, then across the cheek with the tip of his spear—my hatred for him only grew.

Every time I cut him in return—a quick slash across his knuckles, a piercing of my dagger in his shoulder—my resolve grew, too.

But as our fight ached on, it was quickly becoming apparent that Michael had been correct to hang back while I burned myself out on his underlings.

My anger could fuel me for a while. So could desperation.

So could love.

But not forever.

As Michael’s spear crashed hard against my sword and sent it spiraling out of my hand, that realization hurt almost as much as the knowledge that it was all ending now.

Almost. But not quite.

I’d failed my kingdom. Hell would fall to Heaven today. Michael would claim the entire realm of his own.

I'd failed my friends. Don, Mal, Lock—they'd all die here today. The angels wouldn't allow them to live. There was a chance that they were already dead.

I'd failed Evie's friends. I didn't know what the angels would do to Bea, Joan and Ava when they found the three women sheltering in Pandemonium. I hoped they'd show mercy. But if they didn't... it would be my fault too.

Worst of all, I'd failed my family. I'd left Evie a way to quickly escape Hell if Heaven's forces claimed it for their own, but I knew she'd be hunted until they claimed her too.

I'd failed my wife. I'd failed my child, still innocent and helpless inside Evie's womb.

"If it brings you any consolation, adversary, you were never going to win." There was no smile on Michael's lips as he kicked my sword aside and approached me. The tip of his spear was leveled directly at my heart. "This is the way it has to be, and you know it. Those scrolls foretold this moment as well."

"You don't have to do this." I blinked as he mentioned the scrolls again. He thought he had to do this. He thought he was making a choice between me and my family, and the entirety of Earth. "You know Hell received those prophecies too, Michael. I've read them more times than I can count. They never mentioned anything about a battle between you and me."

He didn't know it, but he'd just confirmed a suspicion for me.

It had all been a trick. By who, I still didn't know.

But the scrolls that had been to Heaven and those that had shown up in Hell weren't the same.

"How typical of you, adversary." Michael's lips curled with disgust. "Even with your last breaths, you waste them on more lies."

He lunged for me with the spear, and I pulled myself out of the way. The spear entered my shoulder instead of my heart—just as deadly in its own way. Pain ripped through my muscles like wildfire as he pulled it back out.

It wouldn't kill me outright, but every wound he gave me now would bring me closer to the one that would end my life.

The next time the spear entered me, it took me in the knee. My kneecap shattered as Michael drove the metal through it. More loss. More

pain.

What would Evie think if she could see me now, so injured and weak?

I knew she wouldn't be able to bring herself to hate me. But I wished for it anyway.

She deserved to hate me. I'd failed her. I'd failed her and our child both.

My leg gave out as Michael removed the spear again. My body dropped down onto it, forcing me to kneel to him.

"I'm sorry, Lucifer." Michael leveled the spear at my heart again. There was no joy in his eyes. He was simply doing what he thought needed to be done. "If there was any other way—"

"There *is*." The revelation that the prophecies we'd based this endless war on were full of half-truths and outright falsehoods may have come far too late, but if he would just listen to me—just give me a moment to explain—

"No more tricks, Lucifer." Michael shook his head and drew back his spear for momentum. "It's done."

I closed my eyes and bowed my head.

Not because I was ready to accept this. I had no choice in the matter, but still. I didn't want to die.

It was only, in my final moment, I didn't want Michael's face to be the last thing I saw.

In the darkness behind my eyelids, I drew Evie's face into my mind. Her golden hair. Her heart-shaped jawline. Her luscious dark pink lips and her exquisite dove-gray eyes.

The last thing I saw would be her.

My body was braced for impact. I readied myself for agony of the spear piercing my chest. I knew it would hurt, and when that pain finally slipped away, I knew all would be lost.

But as a gust of hot air whipped around me, the scent of ash and roses along with it, I felt the spear enter my chest—but I didn't feel the life-ending pain that should have come along with it.

The point of the spear was buried in my skin, yes, but not in my heart.

I was alive.

But why?

I opened my eyes to waves of golden locks curtaining around me. Soft, full pink lips were parted in surprise, positioned right over my own.

I saw dove-gray eyes, full of fear and pain.

I saw the face of my wife. My Evie. My everything.

And lower, I saw Michael's spear sticking out through the center of her chest, leaking blood.

Not the black blood of infernals, though.

Not the pearly white blood of angels, either.

Evie's blood was golden. As golden as her hair.

As golden as the glow of the Almighty's love.

"Evie," I gasped, reaching for her. "Evie—love—"

To hold her, I had to drive Michael's spear deeper into my own chest so I could close the space between my body and hers, but it didn't matter. I shoved myself forward until the spear had passed through me as well. It hurt and I bore the pain.

All that mattered right now was having her in my arms.

"Luke." Her forehead rested against mine. Her eyes shimmered with tears. "Luke, I'm so sorry—I didn't mean to—I don't even know how I did it, but—"

"It's all right, love." I smoothed her hair down against the back of her head and squeezed her body tight against mine. "It's going to be all right."

"How?" Her lips trembled. Tears rolled down her face as she touched at the wound in her torso, then the wound in mine. "I've killed us. I've killed us both."

"No, darling girl." I ran my fingers up the short length of spear between us now, gathering her blood. When I held my hand up so she could see it, I did it with faith. With hope. "Look at your blood. Look at the color."

"Gold?" Evie shook her head, unable to make sense of it. "What? Why would..."

"You aren't Infernal anymore, Evie. I don't know how," I took a ragged breath and shoved my pain away. "But you're not."

"It doesn't hurt, Luke." Evie reached up to place her palm against mine. "I thought maybe it meant that I was already dead, but... but it doesn't hurt at all."

Behind us, Michael tugged his spear from our bodies. As the point passed through my chest again, I winced in preparation for more pain, but it didn't come.

I looked down my own wound and had to blink, just to make sure I was seeing it right.

My chest was covered in golden blood as well.

Before we could make sense of it, a brilliant light exploded between us. It surrounded us, blindingly bright. We both had to clench our eyes shut until it faded slightly.

When I opened my eyes again, we were surrounded by a warm, loving, golden glow.

“The Almighty.” I raised my eyes to the sky and found that the light reached all the way up into the clouds above us. “He’s... protecting us, I think. I don’t know why.”

“I don’t know either, Luke. But... I think, maybe...” Evie touched her wound again. Already, right before our eyes, it was healing.

So was mine.

“Tell me, love.” My voice was eager. Something was happening. Something big. Big enough that, behind Evie, even Michael had been silenced by it. “What do you think?”

Evie closed her eyes and moved her hands to her belly. “That light is in here, too. Stronger, even. Brighter.”

“Our child.” *Our son.* “Either the Almighty is smiling down on us because He wants this baby to be born...”

“Or the baby has a stronger connection to him than we thought.” Evie stared at me for a moment, panting. Then, her fingers curled against her belly as she winced. Suddenly, her body was stiff with pain.

“Love. What’s wrong?” The light was still all around us. Our wounds were little more than soft pink scars. But nonetheless, Evie was obviously in pain still. “Are you hurt somewhere else?”

I looked up over Evie’s shoulder, toward Michael. His face was pale with shock. His spear clattered to the ground at his feet.

“What’s happening, Lucifer?” His voice was almost pleading.

I wished I knew.

“I’m going into labor, Luke. My water broke back in Pandemonium. I panicked, and I thought of you...” She paused, clenching her eyes shut again as her chest rose and fell rapidly with breath. “And then I was here.”

Impossible. “The baby isn’t due for nearly two months, though.”

“I know.” Evie pursed her lips and bowed her head. “But it’s coming now.”

“We need to get you to a hospital.” I would have rather taken her to Pandemonium, but that was too great of a risk.

She wasn’t Infernal anymore. Of that much, I was certain.

There was no telling whether Hell would welcome her in willingly or leave her burning for setting foot within it. The hospital was our next best choice.

But as I gathered Evie up in my arms, Michael stepped forward.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I can’t let you leave here. Especially not if the child is on the way.” There was fear in Michael’s eyes still, but his jaw was set firm.

“Look around you, Michael.” I let my gaze wander to the battlefield here in the streets of Las Vegas. Between the tourists, who still wandered through the bodies and blood completely oblivious to what had happened here, the remaining combatants had all stopped fighting.

They were surrounded by the golden light as well.

“It can’t be,” Michael breathed, following my gaze. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

“Tell me one thing, Michael. Those scrolls you were given. The ones that you’ve been reading your prophecies from. Do you know who sent them?”

“No.” Michael gestured vaguely to the light. “But I assumed...”

“So did I,” I admitted. “But in mine, there was no talk of destruction when my son was born. Only change. I’m not lying. Search your heart, and I think you know that what I’m saying is the truth.”

Michael sighed and bowed his head. “Yes. But mine—the end of days was predicted in them. The prophecy couldn’t have been clearer about that.”

“Then we received different prophecies. And we don’t know who sent them.” I met his gaze. “But the love of the Almighty is around us now. Something healed our wounds. Something is protecting us. The scrolls might have been a trick—a horrible joke on us both—but this can’t be faked.”

“No,” Michael agreed. His shoulders slumped in defeat. “I suppose it can’t.”

“Luke,” Evie pleaded with me. Her voice was full of urgency as her fingers dragged against my chest. “Please...”

“We need to go, Michael. She’s having this baby whether you want her to or not.”

“And I’ll let you,” Michael conceded. “But first, I’m going to need something in return.”

“Is this really a time to be making demands, asshole?” Evie snarled at him furiously as another contraction hit.

“We don’t know which set of prophecies is true,” Michael said quickly, holding up a hand. “Until we know, we need to keep Heaven and Hell as separate from Earth as possible. The balance is already upset enough as is.”

“You’re not taking the baby,” I told him firmly. “My answer hasn’t changed.”

“No,” he agreed. “You and Evelyn can live here on Earth. Raise the child together—raise it to be loving and caring and good. I’ve seen how much you love each other. I know you’re capable of it.”

“Then what the *fuck* do you want?” Evie was fierce in her urgency to leave this place, and I could hardly blame her.

“The other humans bound up in this. Your friends, Evelyn. Beatrice and Ava and Joan. They’ve been cavorting around with demons, and it has to stop. They need to return to their lives here on Earth with no remaining connections to Hell.” Michael sought out my eyes. “They need to be made to forget, so the balance can be restored. Any little bit right now helps—and their bonds to Hell are hardly small ones anymore.”

“That’s not for us to decide,” Evie panted. “I’m not bargaining away the lives of my friends just because you want—”

“We’ll talk to them,” Lock called out from behind us. I turned to see his face, bloodied and stoic. But his eyes were tinged with loss. “Ye go on now, Dawnstar. Take yer woman and get yer bairn into the world safe.”

“If it’s our ties to Evie’s friends that are at stake, then we’ll set them right ourselves,” Mal agreed. “Don’t reckon anything else would be right.”

“This isn’t your battle to fight,” said Don. “So don’t. We’ll deal with this. We’ll come find you when it’s done.”

I looked down at Evie. Through her pain, she looked nearly ready to cry.

“I won’t get to say goodbye.” She choked the words out, then buried her face in my chest.

“I know, love.” It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right. But it had to be done. “But they’re going to understand, and we need to get you away from here now.”

“Okay.” Evie nodded. “Okay. Take me, then.”

Michael stepped back, appeased.

He gave me a nod of approval.

Then, take her I did.

My wings unfurled at my back. They flapped twice, then I pushed off of the pavement and took to the skies, the gold light still surrounding us, and Evie held safely in my arms.

LUKE

“**H**old on, love,” I breathed down to Evie as I flew her over Las Vegas in the direction of the nearest hospital. “I’m going to get you there as quick as I can.”

“You’d better,” she panted, clinging to my neck. “I really don’t want to have this baby in mid-air, Luke.”

“You won’t,” I promised. I pushed my wings harder, picking up as much speed as I could. “I promise. I’m going to get you there with plenty of time.”

“I don’t know that this baby is concerned with time.” Evie gritted her teeth and grunted with pain as another contraction hit. “It’s so... so *impatient*. I can feel it. It wants to be in the world, and it wants it *now*.” Evie scowled. “I wish I knew why.”

“Yes, he’s given us a great many things to wonder about today, hasn’t he?” I was still certain that our baby would be a boy. The prophecy had certainly been clear on that much, at least. But the rest—whether Hell’s version of the scrolls was right, or if Heaven’s were, was yet to be seen. “Like why you’re resistant to being stabbed now, for example.”

“And why you are, too.” Evie pressed her cheek to my chest, wincing. “If it wasn’t for these contractions, I’d think I was immortal right now.”

“Immortal,” I repeated as I pushed myself to the top speed I could fly at. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“What’s it?” Evie’s fingers dug in my neck as she struggled to find something to hold onto through her labor pains. “You’re going to have to

spell this out for me again, handsome. My brain's a little too buzzy to make educated guesses right now."

"This baby," I explained. "Whatever ties it has to the Almighty. Every moment we're bathed in that golden glow—our marriage, your coronation, the way your aura turned gold instead of dark when you became infernal—it's all led to this moment right now."

"You think..." Evie paused to take a deep gasp of breath. "The baby has made it so we can't die?"

"Or the Almighty has," I said. "I don't know if we're demons or angels or something entirely different now—but I think, somehow, this was all part of the plan. We're eternal. Impossible to harm. Impossible to kill."

"I can feel it," Evie said with a quick nod. "It's... some kind of protection over us."

"Whatever it is and whoever it's from, we'll take it." I spotted the hospital down below and dove for it. "We're going to be parents, love. No matter who tries to stop us, we're going to survive to raise this child—and it's going to survive, too."

There wasn't a doubt in me. Not in my heart. Not in mind.

Not in my soul.

INSIDE, I handed Evie off to the nurses in the emergency room. They took her away on a stretcher—but not before I stole one last kiss from her lips.

Not a goodbye this time.

Just a *good luck*.

Once she was gone, I had a hard time knowing what to do with myself. I wasn't used to being in hospitals. They didn't exactly know how to deal with mystical wounds.

One of the nurses directed me to a waiting room outside of the maternity ward. It was small and quiet, but that almost made me more restless.

I made my way outside instead, summoned a pack of cigarettes into existence, and burned through them all without smoking them, just to have something to do with my hands.

"First time, huh?" a balding human said as he came out and saw me standing there in a cloud of smoke. "You shouldn't worry. When my first kid was born, I smoked an entire pack while waiting too." He laughed,

sounding a little embarrassed. “Every time my wife has gone into delivery since, it gets a little harder to give them up.”

“Difficult habit to quit.” I thought about offering him one, but if he wanted to stop, that hardly seemed wise. “How many children do you have now?”

“Three,” he said. “One more on the way right now.”

“Brave of you.” If my suspicions were right, I had nothing to worry about in regard to Evie’s safety through labor. If a spear through her side didn’t kill her, childbirth was hardly likely to finish her off. But my nerves were still raw with anticipation anyway. I could hardly imagine feeling like a second time, let alone a fourth.

“It’s not brave,” the man said with a shrug. “It’s just life. I love my wife. I love my kids. They make everything else worth it, you know?”

“I do,” I said softly. *I did*. I put the cigarette out and let it slip into the trashcan at my side, then offered him my hand. “Luke.”

“Jim,” he said, giving me a firm shake. “Nice to meet you.”

As I clasped his hand, I let a little trickle of my power flow into him.

I liked Jim, I’d decided. If this was his fourth time doing this, he more than deserved a little gift for his efforts.

He’d never want to smoke again after today—and in a few weeks, he’d be surprised to notice that his hair was coming back as well.

“Likewise,” I said with a smile. “And good luck.”

EVIE’S LABOR lasted into the wee hours of morning. Lock, Mal and Don all arrived in turn to wait with me in shifts.

It was kind of them. In the brief moments of conversation we bothered to make, I knew that they all had their own hurts to deal with right now. Their losses were written all over their faces.

Lock and Joan. Mal and Ava. Don and Bea. I’d finally secured a future for my wife and my child and myself, but in the process, all three of my closest friends had lost the women that they cared for.

Maybe even the women that they loved.

“How are the Fallen doing?” I asked Don as he sat in the waiting room with me. It was nearing three in the morning now. The last update on Evie from the nurses said she was doing well, but if this baby was really so impatient to be born, I wished he would hurry the hell up.

“Fighting amongst themselves for power like always,” Don said with a dark chuckle. “Lock is staying out of it, but the other four... let’s just say you’re lucky that you’ve managed to wash your hands of them.”

“I’m not surprised.”

If they’d come to the same conclusion I’d had about that glowing golden light that had surrounded Evie and me, then they’d be fighting over who would rule Hell in our place for decades, I imagined. They’d never been able to come to any agreements without my help.

Mulciber was too short-sighted. Mammon, too greedy. Beelzebub was too ambitious, and Belial, too lazy.

Lock was the only one among them I trusted, and he knew well enough to stay out of the fray while the others tore each other apart.

“And how are you doing?”

Don scoffed. “I think you know the answer to that.”

“Have you thought at all about what you’re going to do now?” I asked.

“Drink myself into a coma so I can forget about Bea,” he said with a harsh laugh. “Or, at least, try. It’s the one downfall about how fast we demons process alcohol, isn’t it? Can’t even drink her away now.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and meant it. “I know how it feels to lose the woman you love.”

“I know you do. Nothing to do about it now, though.” Don clenched his jaw and stared at the wall up ahead. There was a painting on it of a landscape—dark earth, white sky, and a golden glow between them on the horizon. I couldn’t quite tell if it was supposed to be a sunrise or a sunset. “She’s safe. That’s what matters. I just have to figure out what to do with myself to keep busy in her absence, I guess.”

Slowly, an idea was forming in my mind. Almost like it had been placed there by someone other than myself.

A little golden seed, planted in my brain and gradually growing into something strong. Something good.

“Have you ever thought about ruling Hell yourself?” I asked. “You’d make a good king.”

“Me? Of course not,” Don scoffed. “Mal would be a better choice. Or Lock. Anyone but the other Fallen, really. I don’t know a thing about ruling kingdoms. I’d be useless on my own.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t have to do it on your own, then.” I glanced at him with a wicked idea glinting in my eyes. “Why don’t you bring Mal

and Lock here? If we're clever about this, all of the problems of succession might soon be solved."

"Dawnstar..." Don said, his voice low with trepidation. "I don't think that's a—"

"Mr. Dawnstar?" a nurse called out as she appeared in the doorway of the waiting room. There was an excited smile on her lips. "Your wife and your baby are ready to see you now."

My heart leapt in my chest as, immediately, I rose to my feet.

"Stop thinking so much," I told Don over my shoulder as I moved to follow the nurse down the hall. "Just get Mal and Lock here. You three should all meet this baby together, I think."

More importantly, Evie and I would need them here for everything that was yet to come.

The nurse took me to the private recovery room that I'd requested for Evie. They'd promised me the biggest, nicest one they had—and I was happy that they'd managed to make good on that request.

"Luke." She turned her head to me, smiling when she saw me in the doorway. Her hair, so much less heavy now that it was cropped to her shoulders, was glowing golden in the low light, and so was she. "I missed you."

"I missed you too. You have no right looking that beautiful after so many hours of labor." She looked tired, too, but there was something glorious about the way her cheeks were flushed and that sparkle in her lovely gray eyes. I wanted to go to her immediately, but instead, I lingered in the doorway, just taking her in.

In her arms, she held a blanket swaddled around something gently wriggling against her breast.

"Come here, handsome," Evie beckoned. "I have someone I want you to meet."

I took a deep breath, then took a step forward.

"My son," I whispered, meeting her smile with one of my own.

"No," said Evie.

"No?"

She moved the blanket back, revealing an angry pink face and a pair of inquisitive eyes. The baby's irises had a starburst pattern to them. Gray in the center, then swirls of pale blue around the edges, all contained within a

dark ring. Already, the baby had peach fuzz hair. Dark like mine, but at their temple, white-blond.

"Your daughter," Evie explained. "It's a girl."

"A... girl." I blinked, taking that fact in.

God. Maybe both of the prophecies had been wrong.

"Are you disappointed?" Evie asked, knitting her brow with concern.

"No," I said immediately. "She's perfect."

Evie's smile returned quickly. "I think so too."

"Can I..." I reached for our little girl and brushed my fingertips against her cheek. She was so small. Being two months early, I supposed that was normal. But despite that, she looked so fully formed. Already, she was her own little person. She cooed softly and closed her eyes as my fingers met her skin. "Can I hold her?"

"Of course. Careful of her head, though. Make sure to hold it up."

I was.

Through all of Evie's lifetimes, I'd never imagined that I would ever love anything as much as I loved her.

But in that moment, as I stared down at the bright, beautiful eyes of the life we'd created together, now cradled in my arms...

My heart pounded. My chest flooded with warmth.

In that moment, I proved myself wrong.

"We never decided on a name," Evie said as I held our girl. "Any ideas?"

"She'll need something beautiful." Something just as lovely as she was. "Jezebel, maybe. Or... How do you feel about Dolly Parton? We could always call her Jolene."

"I think naming our baby girl after an infamous temptress might be shooting ourselves in the feet, sweetheart," Evie said with a laugh. "Looking like she does, you're going to be fending off enough boys when she gets older as it is."

A low growl escaped my throat as I imagined *any* boy thinking he was good enough to claim my perfect little girl.

"I see your point," I admitted. "What about... have you considered giving her your name?"

"Evelyn Dawnstar the Second?" Evie laughed again. "That seems a little prideful, naming her after me. And she doesn't look like an Evie, either. It'd just be confusing, wouldn't it?"

“No. I mean, your original name. Lilith,” I said. “Or... maybe something shorter.”

“Lily,” Evie whispered. Her eyes lit up as her lips formed the sound. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“I think so.” I smiled down at baby Lily. “Definitely not the name of a destroyer of worlds, either.”

“Destroyer of worlds?” Lock’s brogue sounded from behind us. I turned to find him, Don and Mal all standing in the doorway. “That wee bairn is too small to destroy anything but his nappies, you ask me.”

“Good point.” I gave them a nod of recognition. “But I’m proud to announce that it’s a girl.”

“A girl?” Don arched an eyebrow. “But the prophecy...”

“It was wrong.” Maybe both of them were. Heaven’s version and Hell’s alike. “We’ve named her Lily.”

“Pretty name.” Mal still didn’t look happy to be here. Probably because he suspected why the three of them had been called. But he smiled down at baby Lily anyway. He’d always had a fatherly soft spot for small, innocent things. “Congrats, you two. You’ve finally done it, haven’t ya?”

“That’s why I’m glad you’re all here,” I said. “Now that Lily’s here in the world... there’s something we need to discuss with you all.”

“There is?” Evie asked, confused.

“There is,” Don grumbled. “And none of us are going to like it, and none of us have any better options, I’m afraid.”

“You’ll need to abdicate, love,” I told Evie. “I don’t know that either of us will be able to return to Hell now—and I don’t want to take the chance of seeing you harmed for trying.”

“Oh.” Evie blinked. “I... hadn’t even thought about my crown. We’ve been a little busy with other things, I guess.”

“Very true.” I nodded to Don, Mal and Lock. “I think you should name them your successors. The Fallen will tear the realm apart with their infighting until a new ruler is crowned, and I don’t want them pounding down our door when they finally realize that you’re the one who chooses the next king.”

“Me neither,” Evie agreed. “But... all three of them? Can I do that?”

“None of us would take the title on our own,” Mal explained with a grimace. “Hell, I don’t reckon any of us want it as is. But Dawnstar’s right, per usual. It’s the best option any of us have.”

Lock and Don nodded in agreement. None of them looked happy about this arrangement, but at least it would probably keep their minds off the loves they'd just lost.

"In that case..." Evie pursed her lips as she searched for the right words. "I, Queen Evelyn Dawnstar of Hell, abdicate in favor of Moloch, Abaddon, and Malacoda. The new kings of Hell."

"Long live the blood fucking kings, then," Lock grumbled. "And may the Almighty bless our reigns like He's blessed yer wee family—for we'll certainly need it."

"Good." That was taken care of, then. "I'll leave you all to let the Fallen know that they've missed out on yet another power grab, in that case. Let me know when you've arranged your coronations." I smirked. "I'll send flowers."

"You'd better," Don said with a glower.

"Reckon we'll have all earned 'em by then," Mal agreed, arms crossed over his chest.

I turned to Evie and handed Lily back to her.

"That just leaves one last consideration," I said. "Where we should go next. Since the Inferno and Pandemonium are both out."

"Not here in Vegas," Evie said with a sigh. "I know it's your city, Luke, but I'm not sure it's where I want to raise a potential future antichrist."

I chuckled. "Maybe she'll just be a normal little girl. Anything's possible now. But... can I make a suggestion?"

"Of course. We can go anywhere, right?"

"I'm just thinking how nice it might be to raise Lily close to her grandparents," I said slowly. I knew Evie wouldn't love this idea, but maybe it would grow on her in time. "I could always buy us a house nearby. How do you feel about Vermont?"

The laugh burst from Evie's lips like fireworks. They lingered in her eyes, sparkling and bright.

"Woodstock," she said, shaking her head. "Of course you'd say that."

"Will you at least consider it?"

"Oh, what the hell." She brushed her fingers against Lily's peach fuzz hair. "Let's do it. My parents will be thrilled."

EVIE

One Year Later...

Woodstock, Vermont

I never thought waking up to the sound of a baby crying would make me smile.

But as Lily's cries stirred me awake and my eyes slowly opened to the darkest hours of early morning, I found my lips curling into a gentle, easy grin.

The house Luke bought for us was old but beautiful. The natural wood floors creaked beneath my feet as I slipped them into my slippers and rose. I could feel the subtle warmth of a newly stoked fire crackling away in the woodstove that heated the bedroom that Luke and I shared. I pulled a cashmere shawl on over my silk nightie anyway. Spring would arrive soon enough, but until it was here for sure, mornings in Vermont tended to run shivery and cold.

Lily's cries quieted as I headed toward the hall. I was only halfway there when I realized why.

Luke's figure appeared in the doorway of the bedroom with our sweet, dark-haired little girl swaddled in his arms.

"Shh, little bird. Don't want to wake mummy, do you?" he said, brushing the blonde streak in her hair out of her eyes and pressing a

fingertip to her pouting lips. He wore a pair of black silk pajama pants and no shirt, giving me a view of his gorgeous, muscled chest. When he glanced up and saw me standing there before him, he almost looked surprised. Then, beneath the thick, well-kempt beard he'd grown out of his stubble, his mouth curled into a smile. "Ah. Looks like we're too late. Morning, love. Sorry for the ruckus."

"Morning, handsome." I popped up on my tiptoes to place a kiss on his lips, then dipped down to give Lily one on her cheek. "Is she hungry?"

"Might be," Luke admitted. "I was going to see if I couldn't rock her back to sleep before I tried the bottle."

"It's all right. I forgot to pump last night anyway. I've got plenty of milk right here," I said with a little laugh, squeezing one of my breasts gently. It felt nearly ready to burst.

"Goddess," Luke whispered fondly as he passed Lily into my arms. "Here. Come sit in the rocking chairs with me."

Luke put his arm around my waist and guided me to the antique rocking chairs he'd refinished. They were close to the woodstove. The air around them was already flushed with warmth.

As I sat down in the chair and slipped my breast from my nightie, I took a moment to appreciate how quiet it was here. Serene, even. This was nothing like the bright lights and constant bustle of Las Vegas. The house was perched up on a ridge, surrounded by pine trees and overlooking Woodstock below.

It was picturesque. Everything about my life was now.

But it still felt crazy that after everything, *this* was the life we'd ended up with.

"Did you ever dream you'd spend the rest of your days in Vermont, of all places?" I asked as Lily latched.

Luke shifted behind me to rub my shoulders while I fed our girl. "Maybe not. But I like it here anyway. It's comfortable. It's peaceful. And best of all, I have the two of you."

"Still seems a little cold for your tastes," I teased. "Compared to Hell, anyway."

"You're the one who doesn't like the cold," Luke countered. Even through the shawl, I could feel the warmth of his hands. "It's nice, actually. You know how much I love an opportunity to keep you warm. Besides, I like Woodstock. Brings back old memories."

“You’ve been here before?” If so, this was the first time he’d ever mentioned it.

“No. But the name... the last time I was at a Woodstock, it was 1969 in Bethel, New York.”

“Bethel, huh?” I blinked as my brain slowly made the connection. “Wait—you mean *Woodstock*, Woodstock. The music festival.”

“The very same. You and I had a full, blissful day of listening to music and falling in love. You were very receptive to my charms last time, you know. Shame that the angels crashed the party.”

He bent down and kissed the starburst on my cheek. A little flash of memory came with it. Through my own eyes, I saw Luke shirtless and glistening with sweat. Janis Joplin was wailing on a stage behind him as I pulled a flower from my hair and tucked it behind Luke’s ear.

He was smiling with pure love in his eyes. I was smiling, too. I felt that same love for him pounding in my chest.

I blinked and the memory faded.

“We were happy,” I said softly. I knew that it must have ended badly—our past lives together always had—but now that we’d finally gotten a chance to have happiness forever and for real, that fact hurt so much less.

“We were,” Luke agreed. His thumb pressed deep into the muscles where my shoulders met my neck, easing away the knots that had formed there in the night. “And we are. Do you want me to show you more?”

“No, but thank you.” I glanced over my shoulder to smile at him. “I’m happy enough living in the here and now. We have everything we need here. A beautiful home, free babysitting whenever we want it...” Luke had bought a house for my parents just down the road, and they were always eager for as much time with their granddaughter as they could get.

“Our little girl and each other,” Luke finished. “I see what you mean. Out of all the lives we could have had together, I’m glad this is the one that stuck.”

“You don’t miss ruling over Hell at all?” I’d asked him that question many times before. His answer was always the same.

But some part of me found it hard to believe that the Devil himself had really given all of the glitz and glamour and power of his life as King of Hell just to be with...

Well, with *me*.

“Not a bit, silly girl.” Luke moved his fingers into the roots of my hair and massaged my scalp in pleasant, slow little circles. “Wish I would have done it sooner. It was all getting a little boring, truth be told.”

“And this isn’t?”

“Are you joking?” Luke sounded inordinately surprised. “My days are filled with chopping wood and making pancakes. Playing with my daughter and fucking my beautiful wife. What more could I possibly want?”

“Your own beer brewery,” I joked. “A maple syrup brand?”

“I’ve been thinking about getting into brewing beer, actually,” Luke mused. “I have some excellent old recipes from Sumeria that I’d like to try my hand at again.”

I laughed. “Of course you do. I should have never let you grow out your beard. You’re going to be a mountain man in no time at all.”

The sound of tiny feet came from the hall. We both turned our gazes to the doorway as The Beast waddled in. He was chubbier now than he’d been as a puppy, but no less adorable for it.

“You’re going to have to stop feeding him sausages beneath the table at breakfast,” I warned Luke. “If he puts on any more weight, we’re going to have to put him on a diet.”

“I know, I know. But I can tell how bad he wants them.” Luke drew his fingers out of my hair and went to scratch The Beast behind his perky ears. “And I can’t help but sympathize with a man who will do anything to get what he wants.”

“Was he sleeping in Lily’s room again?”

“Wedged as close to her crib as he could get,” Luke confirmed. “I think he’d jump up into it and cuddle up right next to her if his little legs weren’t so short. *Shake, boy.*”

Luke offered The Beast his hand, and The Beast raised a paw to place on Luke’s fingers in return.

“Good boy,” Luke said with admiration. “Maybe only one sausage this morning, then—but I’m not cutting you off quite yet.”

The Beast waddled over to my feet and lay down between them. Not long after he closed his eyes, his legs were kicking in his dreams.

“What do you think The Beast dreams about?” I asked Luke. “World domination, or dominating breakfast buffets?”

“Chasing angels and demons, no doubt.” Luke moved to the window of our balcony, where the sun was beginning to peek up over the horizon. He drew the curtains back to let the light in. “And they’d all deserve it, too.”

Gently, I frowned.

There was only one thing imperfect about this life that we’d created together.

Well. Three things, really.

“Do you think Ava and Joan and Bea are happy?” I knew it was for the best that they’d forgotten about Heaven and Hell, but still, I missed them all. Their friendship had gotten me through some hard times. It had gotten them through some bad ones as well.

“Ignorance is bliss, I suppose.” Luke turned to me again, a sad smile on his lips. “At least now they’ll be able to go on with their lives in peace. But I know how hard losing them was on you. I’m sorry, love.”

“It’s okay,” I said, nodding. “You’re right. They gave up a lot for us while we were trying to set things right. I do miss them, but I’m glad they’re safe. I hope they stay that way.”

I still checked their Instagrams from time to time. Bea would be getting married in a few months. Ava and Joan would be her bridesmaids. They’d all finished up their degrees. Ava had taken over her family’s flower shop and Joan had just landed a job with the UN.

“If they only knew what they’d lost, love, they’d miss you too.” Luke came back over to me as Lily finished feeding. He held his arms out for her and cradled her against his shoulder, rubbing and patting her back until she burped. The sound was loud enough, it made us both laugh. “But you shouldn’t worry about their safety. It’s not like Don and Lock and Mal to let those three wander the Earth unattended. They might not remember anything about Hell, but the Kings of Hell certainly remember them.”

“I hope you’re right.” I suspected he was. Don, Lock and Mal had all loved my friends in their own ways. If I knew anything about infernal passions—and I was pretty sure I did—they ran deeper than memories. Longer than lifetimes.

Luke’s friends in Hell would make damn sure that my friends here on Earth never came to any harm.

“Sun’s coming up.” Luke glanced at the balcony again, then passed Lily back to me. He offered me his hand as well. “Want to watch it?”

"I'd love that." Lily was dozing again now. She always got sleepy when she was full. Wrapped up in her soft blue blanket, she was snuggly and warm. I shifted her into the crook of one arm and took Luke's hand. "Let's go."

But as Luke led me out onto the balcony, I saw his wings unfurl from his bare shoulder blades. They were more impressive than ever now. White, like an angel's, tipped with black, like a demon's.

The best of both worlds.

"Oh," I said with a little laugh. "You didn't mean that we'd just watch the sun from the balcony, did you?"

"I was thinking we might enjoy the view from a little higher up," said Luke. "If you're willing, of course."

I smiled. There was a wicked glint in Luke's eyes that always led to something good.

"Let's go," I agreed, and Luke whisked me up into his arms while I cradled Lily in my own.

His wings unfurled to their full span, then flapped hard as he took flight.

The higher up Luke flew us, the more beautiful little Woodstock looked below. The trees were frosted with the final snow of the season. The sunrise on the horizon had painted the sky a beautiful red and royal purple.

It was so lovely for a moment that it took my breath away.

It was colder up here, but Luke and Lily were both so warm, it was easy for me to stay warm too.

"This is really our life now, isn't it?" I whispered up at Luke. "Sometimes, it still seems too good to be true."

"Our lives will be whatever we want to make of them," said Luke. He pressed the side of his nose to my temple and nuzzled against my skin as he flew. "I still want to take you to the ocean. I haven't forgotten that little red bikini of yours yet."

"Mm. And I still want to see you in a pair of tight swim trunks," I agreed. "Maybe when Lily's a little older, we could go on vacation together. All of us, as a family. Dad's been talking retirement lately, and Mom always has summers off."

"Perfect," Luke breathed. His nose trailed down my cheeks as his lips sought out mine. "Just like you."

Bathed in the warm glow of sunrise and the nippy chill of the air, we kissed. Every time, it felt like it was our first.

Better than our first, actually.

Now, I knew there'd never be a last.

Our kiss was broken only when Lily stirred. Her little legs kicked as she tried to wiggle out of the blanket. As she leaned out of my arms, cooing and reaching for the sun, my heart leapt up in my chest.

I clutched her tight against my body before she fell. Her brow furrowed at this denial of freedom, but the laugh on my breath was one of relief.

"Dangerous little bird," Luke said, chuckling. "She wants to fly too."

"No flying until you're older," I said down to her, my voice stern. "You're too still too little."

Lily only frowned even deeper. Her lips were pursed in a petulant pout.

"Mama," she said, reaching for the sun once more with her chubby little fist. "Sun! Sun!"

"I know," I cooed back to her. She could say so many words now. *Papa* and *Beastie* and *more*. Far more than she should have been able to for her age—but I suspected that her ever-growing vocabulary was far from the only thing special about her.

The prophecies about our daughter still weighed on me sometimes.

Hell's scrolls claimed she'd bring about great change to our world. Sometimes, it seemed like that was exactly what Earth needed.

But Heaven's scrolls said that she would bring about the end of days. It was hard to imagine such a sweet little girl could end existence itself—but we still didn't know which set of prophecies was true.

We didn't even know if either of them were true at all—or who would have so much to gain from such world-shattering lies if one or both ended up being false.

All we could do was raise her well. We'd love her. We'd teach her to love in return.

The sunrise was turning golden. It reminded me of a different love—one from the Almighty, who I was still certain smiled down on Lily every day.

Maybe love was the answer. It had been for Luke and me.

With enough love, I knew, Lily would be able to make sure that any changes she brought to our reality were only for the greater good.

“She’s getting restless,” I told Luke as Lily continued to kick. The blue and gray swirls of her eyes were still focused ambitiously on the horizon. She *really* wanted to reach out and catch that sun. “Maybe you should fly us back, before she tries to throw herself out of my arms again.”

“Falling is a family trait now, I suppose,” Luke said as he turned us around.

“Will you make us pancakes for breakfast?” I asked hopefully as my stomach rumbled beneath Lily’s weight. “Those chocolate chip ones you do so well. You know how much she likes when we let her have little bites.”

“Only if you make the coffee,” Luke bargained. “It always tastes better when you pour it into my mug.”

“Deal,” I agreed. Lily whimpered in disappointment, still wriggling desperately as the sun disappeared behind Luke’s wings. “And then—Lily! Shh. You don’t want to grab the sun, silly thing. Your father might have survived his fall, but I don’t want to test our luck with you just yet.”

“Devil’s daughter, Devil’s luck,” quipped Luke. “She might just surprise you.”

“And how’s your luck looking these days?” I asked him.

“Oh, it’s looking up,” Luke said, smirking. “With you two in my life, it always is. When we go back to Vegas next, I’ll play a few rounds of poker and win us a fortune.”

“You’re already the richest man in the world, Luke,” I reminded him. “Do you really think you need more?”

“Mm. Maybe not.” Luke flew us back to our beautiful home on our beautiful ridge, dusted with snow and surrounded by deep green pines. “I have everything I need right here in my arms.”

DON

Beatrice. It was the name of my first love. I'd always thought she'd be my last.

I'd loved her more than the sky loved to hold the sun. She'd brightened the darkness of my world. She'd put color into the grays and blacks that made up my entire life.

She'd made me happy.

She'd made me feel things I'd never thought possible. Things I'd never felt before and hadn't felt since.

Just like the sky lost the sun to the dark of night, I'd lost her, too. It had all happened so many years ago, it shouldn't have mattered anymore.

But it did.

Or at least, it had.

Right up until that first moment I'd laid eyes on a new Beatrice, sitting there with all her friends and my comrades in the lounge of Heresy. She was much like the last one, from the richness of her beauty to the fire of her temper, for a single, blissful moment, I'd genuinely believed that the Almighty had decided to bring my love back for another cycle. Another try, just like Lucifer and his Lilith had been given.

A second chance.

For all I knew, maybe He had.

If so, he really was a cruel god.

She'd made me laugh. She'd made my body awaken, my cock stir, my heart pound. For so long, I'd felt like a dead man walking through the colorless limbo of the Abyss.

For so long, I'd walked alone.

Every time I had her by my side, she brought me back to life.

And today, on this cursed, sunny morning, I'd lose her all over again.

Just like the first time, she'd been promised to another man.

Today, he'd make her his bride.

I lurked on the edges of the garden party at her father's estate. I didn't have an invitation, but I was a king of Hell now. I hardly needed one. If any of those security guards I'd spied in their overpriced suits came my way asking for one, I'd send them wandering off through the hedge maze, thinking of kittens and posies and rainbows.

If that didn't work, I supposed I'd just have to break their arms. With the way I'd overheard them talking about all the filthy things they'd like to do to Bea's bridesmaids, they certainly deserved it.

But that was a last resort. My goal wasn't to be noticed today. Keeping a low profile was paramount.

It wasn't like anyone here was going to recognize me.

Least of all, the bride herself.

I scowled as I moved through the rosebushes that grew thick and wild toward the back of the estate. They were untamed compared to the rest of the perfectly manicured gardens.

They reminded me of her.

Every rose was as thick as a fist and deep red. It had always been my favorite color on Bea's lips.

Beneath those roses, though...

I was careful to mind all the thorns.

When I drew near to the side of the house, I found the roses began to climb up a trellis attached to the stucco of the outer wall. They led all the way up to a white marble balcony that overlooked the rose gardens.

And standing there, leaning against the railing...

There she was.

Her long, chestnut hair was curled into beautiful, thick waves like a dark ocean. Her lips were that deep red that I loved so much. Always had. She wore a Zuhair Murad wedding dress, elegant yet dramatic, with a bodice that cupped her full breasts like my hands once had. Her lovely face was partially concealed by a Mantilla veil, but despite that, I could tell she was crying.

It made my chest ache just to watch.

She couldn't see me, but I could see her. I wanted to call out her name, climb up the trellis and comfort her, but I knew I couldn't.

She didn't know who I was anymore.

More proof of a cruel god.

I was a stranger to her now. The moment that I thought she might finally be mine, Bea's memory of all things contained within Heaven and Hell had been erased. Including me.

Especially me.

The only blessing within that curse was that I could still watch over her without her noticing.

To Bea, I wasn't anything more than just another face in the crowd now.

The sounds of her tears were heartbreaking. But as my ears perked up to her gentle crying, I heard something else.

From the other side of the thicket of rosebushes, something more sinister was whispering furtively.

As difficult as it was to tear my focus away from Bea, I did.

Furtive whispers had no place at a wedding. My suspicion was immediately roused at the sound.

"Stop worrying, Simon. It's almost over now." The voice that whispered was deep and dark. There was something inhuman about its charms. Something positively demonic, in fact. "You've done well. Your father will be proud."

The voice was familiar to me. It called to a memory that I couldn't entirely place.

Where had I heard that voice before?

"And when it's over, she won't be my problem anymore?" Simon's voice was far too eager. I recognized it as the voice of Bea's husband-to-be. "If she'd only obey me, it'd be different. But as things are... it would all be so much easier if she would simply go away."

I had to fight back the growl rising in my throat.

They were obviously talking about Beatrice. *My* Beatrice. Whether she knew she was or not.

And the things they were saying...

There was no way this could be anything good.

"She'll be gone forever soon. Then, you'll be free to do whatever you like." I could hear a smile on the lips of the first voice. It wasn't a nice

smile. Not in the least. “Just play your part until the wedding night. Then, we’ll take care of the rest.”

“Thank God,” Simon breathed. “I’m so ready for this whole ordeal to be done.”

“Don’t thank the Almighty, boy.” A harsh chuckle came from the other side of the bushes. I tried to peer through the foliage to see who that laugh belonged to, but they were too thick. There was no way to part the bushes without risking detection. “Remember who you are now. Thank your father. Thank *me*.”

“Yes. Thank you,” said Simon. “I appreciate this. Really.”

“No trouble at all.” I heard a hiss of smoke that I recognized as the sound of an infernal entity dematerializing from this plane. As the scent of sulfur filled the air, the voice lingered behind. “Pleasure’s all mine.”

I glanced back up at Bea. Had she heard any of what I’d just heard? She was obviously in danger. Did she have any idea how much or what kind?

Apparently not. She was busy dabbing her eyes dry with a handkerchief and moving back into the room beyond the balcony, completely oblivious to the conversation occurring below.

I hadn’t just come here to watch over Bea, and I knew it.

I’d come here to try to say goodbye.

I’d never fully understood Bea’s engagement. I knew her father and Simon’s father were business partners. International banking moguls who wanted to keep the business in the family after they died. That much, I supposed, I could make sense of.

What I couldn’t understand was why she went along with it. Why her father’s wishes and will were so much more important to her in her mind than her own.

But now, I knew that this arranged marriage of hers was far more sinister than I’d previously realized.

Her husband had no intentions of being a good one.

He’d made a deal with a demon. One who was certain he could make her disappear.

Not on my watch.

I brushed aside the rosebushes, putting on my most charming grin as I approached the fair-haired, olive-skinned Simon. The man who’d been lucky enough to have a woman like Bea handed to him.

The man who was so eager to throw her away.

“Simon! How are you?” I kept my voice friendly, but gruff. It was the way I was sure his father’s business associates greeted each other. To finish the effect, I struck out a hand for him to shake. “Congratulations on your big day.”

“What? Ah... thank you.” Simon appeared startled to see me.

Good. He should have been.

“Not getting cold feet, I hope?” I asked as I shook his hand.

“Um. Pardon me for asking, but... who are you?”

I could have said so many things in that moment.

I could have lied.

But as I took on Simon’s appearance, from his tanned skin to his fair, tousled hair, right down to the tuxedo he wore, I knew I’d enjoy torturing him with what I was about to do so much more.

“I’m your worst nightmare, boy.” I let him stare at me in horror for a moment as he took in the fact that I now wore his appearance like a well-cut suit.

Then, as he opened his mouth to scream, I decked him hard enough to send his eyes rolling back and his body slumping to the ground.

The wedding would go on as planned. Maybe, if I played my cards right, so would the honeymoon.

But whatever demonic misdeeds Simon and his infernal friend had in store for Bea would not.

Not on my watch.

I dipped down to pluck the unconscious Simon’s boutonniere—a lovely white rose—from his lapel so I could pin it to my own.

Then, I opened a portal to the Abyss and nudged his body in with the toe of my Italian leather shoe.

Now, there was no evidence that anything was amiss.

There never would be.

I left the rose garden with a slight spring in my step and smirk on my lips.

I’d protect Bea. I’d save her from anyone who meant to do her harm.

And now, I’d marry her, too.

The day was suddenly beginning to look like it would be a good one after all.

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LUCIFER'S FATE

MARRIED TO THE DEVIL: BOOK 3

Roxie Ray & Skye Wilson

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